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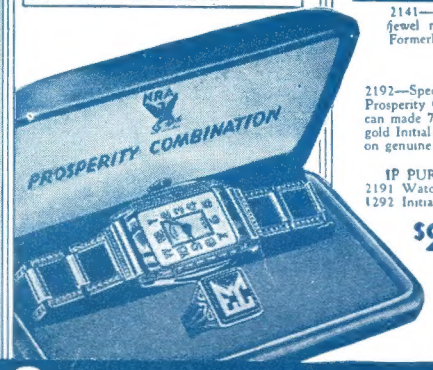

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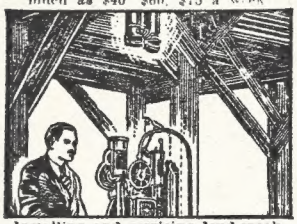

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J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute
Department 4KK9
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10¢ DIME WESTERN MAGAZINE

VOLUME VI | OCTOBER 1st, 1934 | NUMBER 4

One Complete Western Novel

Last of the Fighting O'Days.....By T. T. Flynn 10
Major FitsLee swore that he'd pay for his son's death with the lives of three O'Days. But young Johnny O'Day, dreamy-eyed youngster of the clan, aimed to show that the blood-call can be stronger than the killer-urge.

Three Complete Western Novelettes

Black Outlaw.....By Walt Coburn 54
When they saw that huge black Murder steer, omen of evil and sudden death, outlaw leader and range waif fought together against a two-way lobo pact.

Code of the Owlhoot Pack.....By Ray Nafziger 78
The heritage of his Colt-wise kin rode hot in Tip Younger's blood, waiting for the time when he'd be forced to live up to the gunman's code of "Kill or be killed!"

Death Rides the Slash M.....By Robert E. Mahaffay 104
Cattleman's courage and range-savvy backed Manton's play when he set out to rebuild his Slash M against a bullet combine.

Three Western Short Stories

Tensleep Sells His Guns.....By Bart Cassidy 43
Tensleep Maxon looped a hell-roaring range-war with his rope tied hard and fast.

Bullet Verdict.....By Cliff Farrell 69
It takes a heap of fighting guts to ferret out a misdeal of justice.

Gallows Stake.....By Miles Overholt 97
"The minute that trap is sprung in El Centro, you, too, will die!"

—And—

Manhood Brand.....By Trail Rider 8
Dolly Welter drew down gun-lightning on his boss . . .

In the Saddle.....A Department 122

Cover Painting by Walter M. Baumhofer
Story Illustrations by Don Hewitt and A. Leslie Ross

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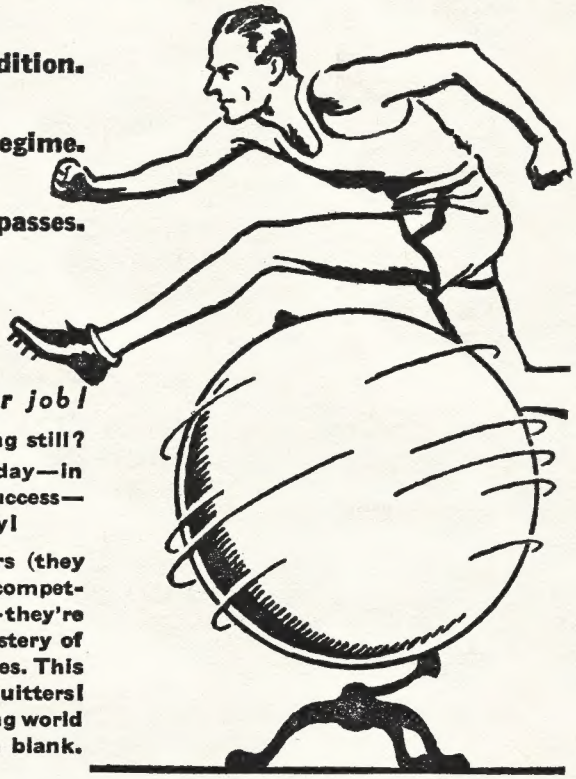
★ **BANG . . . It's the end of a regime.**

★ **BOOM . . . another fallacy passes.**



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30x5.25-20		2.95	1.15
31x5.25-21		3.25	1.15
28x5.50-18		3.35	1.15
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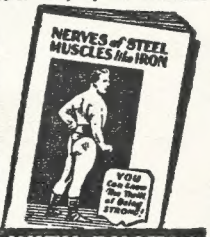

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Manhood Brand

YOUNG, wiry, gaunt as a hunted wolf, he came to the 99 Bar, on the Mex border, asking for a job. He hesitated when Old Cephas Carlin, 99 Bar boss, asked his name. And as he reached for a "handle," a cry came from one of the hands who had examined the stranger's rim-fire Miles City rig: "Looky, boss. He's a dala-vuelta *man!" Meaning in Spanish that he was one who worked with a long rope, who dallied when tied to a steer. So Old Cephas put him down as Dolly Welter.*

A top-hand, Dolly Welter soon changed to respect and friendship the scorn of his Southern saddle pards for a Northern puncher's ability. And then came the trouble between the 99 Bar and the neighboring Muleshoe. The one battle of that brief conflict lasted five minutes and was disastrous to the 99 Bar. Out of seven men, only Dolly Welter and two others won free.

In the fringe of the crowd that watched Doc Yoacum, new ramrod of the Muleshoe, and his imported gunmen—Corkscrew Brines, Choppy Slavins and Utah Doakes—take their victory, Dolly Welter had glimpsed a face. It was a face that stirred him. And so he was twice nervous as he faced Old Cephas in the ranch office.

"I drawed down the lightnin' on yuh, boss," confessed Dolly Welter, bitterly. "Lissen: I'm no good . . . a jailbird. They're . . . they've come fer me. . . ."

"Don't wanta hear it!" snapped the cowman. "Then I kin speak the truth when I lie fer yuh."

Dolly Welter shook his head. "No use, boss. I reckon I'll mosey along." He saddled, shook hands and rode away—headed straight to the Muleshoe. The foreman and his riders were in town celebrating. Only two hands were holding down the spread, playing cards when Dolly Welter entered. Corkscrew Brines and Choppy Slavins eyed him narrowly.

"Well," snapped Brines, "what you huntin'?"

"Skunk meat!"

"Say," suggested the gunman, "them pearl-gripped guns is doubles fer them wore by Two-gun Berringer. Wanted fer murder in Wyoming."

Four guns flashed. All three men were down. Only Dolly Welter got up, weavingly. Roaring hoofs echoed outside. Doc Yoacum and Utah Doakes stood in the portal, their men outlined behind them. They stared, gasped, drew. Dolly Welter shot methodically.

Roaring pistols whipped the raging Muleshoe hands from the door. Old Cephas Carlin piled inside. A terrible grief touched and left him as he felt the lusty beat of the youngster's heart. "Too tough tuh kill," he murmured, and rose to face a stranger who had entered—the stranger whose face had alarmed Dolly Welter the day before.

"Five minutes too late," the man grieved. "That's Two-gun Berringer. I'm Tal Norton—Cheyenne marshal. I've got a warrant here fer . . ."

As he produced the paper, Old Cephas snatched it, tore it to scraps.

"Damn yore warrant!" he barked. "Dolly's proved his loyalty, his manhood, payin' mebby with his life tuh clean this range. . . ."

"An' savin' me the trouble," added the lawman, "uh takin' Yoacum an' his pards back to hang. They done the killin' Berringer was convicted of. But the trail led to Yoacum. One of his bunch squealed an' I started south. The warrant was fer Yoacum. Berringer's clear."

Which explains why Dolly Welter ramrods the 99 Bar, why his relations with the Muleshoe are peaceful, why Old Cephas brags continual about the bronzed and silent youngster who's mentioned in his will.

Lucky? Mebbyso, amigos, *if luck is the hallmark of manhood brand.*

—*TRAIL RIDER*

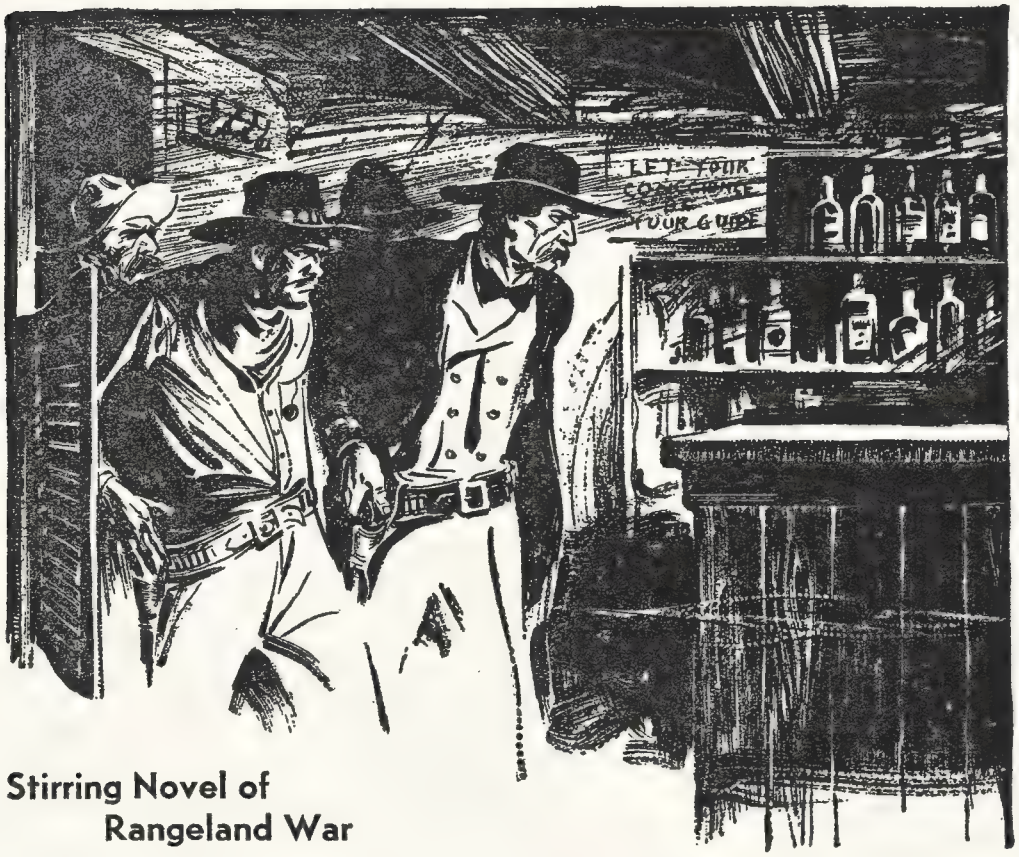
SALUTE the line-up of first class fighting men you'll meet in the October 1st issue of *Adventure,* on the newsstands now. There's Just Another Jones, who jokes as he rides single handed into Satan's Pit to clean up the West's most dangerous gang of outlaws. Robert E. Pinkerton writes about him in a stirring complete novelette. There's Barry, who proves to a young cavalry officer that he is something more than just a gambler in the draft riots of the Civil War. Donald Barr Chidsey tells his story. The wild night of a Legionnaire—that's told by Kingsley Moses and Curtis Thomas. A young pugilist fights the fight of his life in Eddy Orcutt's story. White men come to grips with dangerous head hunters in a thrilling yarn by Frederick Moore. In Ared White's serial America's ace secret service agent dares a thousand hazards in Germany. Andrew A. Caffrey tells the true story of the first bold balloon flight across the channel. And in Weston Martyr's complete novelette—there are two in this issue—six ship loads of men from as many nations fight for the treasure of a pearl laden lagoon. It's on sale now, the October 1st issue of

Twice a Month **Adventure** **15c**

By T. T. FLYNN

LAST OF THE

(Author of "Border Blood," etc.)



Stirring Novel of Rangeland War

Major FitzLee, arrogant and iron-willed range ruler, swore he would pay for his son's death with the lives of three O'Days. But Young Johnny O'Day, dreamy-eyed youngster of the clan, aimed to show that one man's courage may balance the scales against a range-full of gun-hirelings.

IT BEGAN peaceably enough at Jack Diamond's bar, with six men playing stud, and it ended in red lances of gun-fire and the groans of dying men and the tears of bereaved women.

Men crowded Jack Diamond's place that fateful night, jammed the bar two deep, and clustered about green baize-topped tables to watch the play. There was a fair-sized group around the table where Darrel FitzLee, scion of the Double Loop, was shuffling the cards again, stacking his chips against the pile of Steve O'Day. Dave Cole, foreman of the Double Loop was among the six players at that table; other Double Loop men were at the bar. Somewhere in town, too, was Johnny O'Day, Steve's younger brother.

FIGHTING O'DAYS

But Steve, in the heat of the play, wasn't thinking of Johnny, the dreamer, nor of his other brother, Cass. He was playing, as he always did, recklessly, laughing a little, a taunting challenge glinting from his eyes as he laid down his cards and stretched out his hands for the pot. . . .

Destiny, as someone has said, often hinges on the turn of a card. He should have added that it also hinges on the quickness of a man's temper and on the speed with which that temper can be backed up.

Young Darrel FitzLee had a temper, and so did Steve O'Day.

Darrel FitzLee had been drinking, as a gentleman should drink, straight whiskies, one after another; and, as a gentleman should, he carried his liquor well, sitting a little straighter, staring with increased brightness in his straight blue eyes. And if Darrel FitzLee's face was slightly flushed and his voice a trifle louder and tinged with arrogance as he played his cards, that was no more than was to be expected from one of the FitzLees.

Steve O'Day had won steadily since he sat in the game. The chips before him were stacked higher than any others at the table. He played with a quick recklessness which over-shadowed even the sweeping size of Darrel FitzLee's bets. Steve had always been like that, quick, fiery, reckless.

"I'll tilt it ten," Steve said lightly.

"And ten!" Darrel FitzLee answered.

EACH man had an ace showing. Dane Walker, the house man, had tossed an ace away with his cards. Every man at the table, and those standing behind the chairs, knew that either Steve O'Day or Darrel FitzLee had an ace for a hole card—or else each man was magnificently bluffing. Either one was capable of that to the bitter end.

Men gathered about the table, watching silently as stack after stack was pushed into the pot. Darrel FitzLee's hand was shaking slightly as he pushed his last stack in and pulled out a checkbook. His voice was high, arrogant. "I'll make it for any amount you name, O'Day," he sneered. "You seem to want a real game and, by God, I'll give it to you!"

"I reckon not," Steve O'Day smiled as he shook his head. "You've been drinking a little too much. I'd end up by taking your shirt. I ain't a hog."

Slamming the checkbook on the table, Darrel FitzLee flared: "Are you saying I'm drunk?"

"Nope," Steve smiled. "But if you start writing big checks it'll maybe make someone think you are. I'll call you."

Steve matched the last stack with one of his own and turned over his hole card—an ace. Steve had two aces. Counting the ace Dane Walker, the houseman, had thrown away and the one Darrel FitzLee had turned up, all four aces were in sight. Steve O'Day had not been bluffing. He had won in a few minutes of play the year's salary of two good top hands, for Darrel FitzLee had nothing that could match those two aces.

Steve started to sweep in the chips, with that unchanging slight smile still on his lips.

"Wait a minute!" Darrel FitzLee shouted.

The flush on the handsome face had turned into a mottled anger now. Darrel FitzLee turned over his hole card, slammed it down in the center of the table and kicked back his chair and lurched to his feet.

Darrel FitzLee's hole card was an ace too; the fifth ace showing in the game.

"You're a damned cheat and a crooked card player, O'Day!" Darrel FitzLee charged loudly. "I might have looked for something like this when I sat down in a game with scum like you!"

The smile vanished from Steve O'Day's face, leaving it bleak and impassive. He spoke coldly. "My game was straight. I don't know a damn thing about that fifth card! Calm down an' let's straighten this out!"

"You're a liar!" Darrel FitzLee said thickly. "And there's only one way to straighten out a crooked play!" Men standing back of the chairs scattered as Darrel FitzLee reached for his holster.

"Wait a minute!" Steve O'Day yelled. "Don't do that!"

His hand was snapping to his hip as he finished speaking; for Darrel FitzLee's hand was already at thigh, drawing his gun.

Steve O'Day got his gun out first as he came to his feet. He had been noted since a boy for his quick, deadly shooting ability. All three of the O'Day boys were crack shots.

Darrel FitzLee would not have had a chance if it hadn't been for Dave Cole. No one had paid any attention to the Double Loop foreman, whose thin pointed face and silent manner carried him through life always in the background—and the more effective and deadly for it. Now, unexpectedly, Dave Cole's big belt gun blasted over the edge of the table, blasted at Steve O'Day a bare arm's length away where no man could have missed him.

The bullet struck Steve O'Day in the chest. He staggered back a step, faltered; and as he stood there in a half daze, Darrel FitzLee shot him again.

Steve O'Day was done for. Steve O'Day knew it. The daze passed. He spread his legs to brace his tottering body. He smiled thinly again while the swift glaze of onrushing death came over his eyes. He lifted his gun with calm, deliberate effort and shot once at Darrel FitzLee as the two other guns blasted at him again.

Yes, Steve O'Day was done for. He went down on the loose sawdust which covered the floor, landing heavily, inertly, with his life gushing out in a bright red stream over his shirt front.

And Darrel FitzLee fell back over his chair and crashed to the floor also, the sneering arrogance, the mad rage, wiped abruptly from his face by the dark little hole which Steve O'Day had bored above the bridge of the clean cut, aristocratic FitzLee nose.

JOHNNY O'DAY was at the Crescent Bar as Steve, his brother, died smiling, on his feet in the saloon down the street. Johnny O'Day wasn't paying a great deal of attention to where Steve was that evening. Johnny, standing with his elbows on the damp mahogany, dreamily making wet circles with the bottom of his beer glass, was thinking about Mollie FitzLee, while a puncher pounded out *My Wild Irish Rose* on the warped and battered piano.

The other two O'Day's, Cass and Steve, never had that dreamy look. "That boy's different," Ma O'Day had often said when the three boys were younger. "Johnny'll never be like Cass and Steve. Catch them settin' around, dreamin'—the young hellions!"

But Johnny didn't care, and he cared least of all now, for there, dancing in his mind, was the beauty and charm and grace of Molly FitzLee; each gesture of her, the unconsciously imperious toss of her head; the easy way of her in the saddle; her smile as she turned to him, and the laughter in her brown eyes when they were riding that morning across the bottom pasture of the Double Loop, the range of the proud FitzLee men and their prouder women.

Johnny O'Day was at peace, there in the Crescent Bar, and so he did not hear the roaring shots, smell the powder smoke that drifted over the big round table where cards and chips lay in passive mockery of the destruction they had brought about.

Dave Cole blew in the end of the belt gun, held it for a moment as he looked challengingly around at the witnesses.

"Anybody got anything to say about it?" Dave Cole demanded harshly. "All you men seen O'Day grab for his gun. He was honing for trouble."

The Double Loop men were already gathering around the spot, each one armed, each one plainly showing he was ready for trouble. It had happened so fast that many of the witnesses were not sure who had gone for his gun first. If there were any others who thought differently they had nothing to say in the face of that show of FitzLee power.

A moment later all eyes were on Old Major Jefferson FitzLee. He came slowly from the end of the bar, a tall, erect man in a black coat and polished boots, with his black hat tilted a trifle on his white hair and his carefully-tended white mustache giving dignity and force to the thin arrogance of his face. His title of major won legitimately from the Civil war, his age and his prestige as head of the FitzLee clan, all helped to clear a silent, respectful way before him.

Silently the Major stopped by the overturned chair, looked down at the body sprawled motionless on the sawdust with

the revolver still clutched in its hand. Silently he regarded his first-born, the pride and joy of his declining years.

His voice was stilted, strained, unlike the voice with which he usually spoke. He turned his head, looking at the silent men gathered about.

"He's dead!" Major Jefferson FitzLee said slowly. His eyes grew bright with unspoken grief; his voice came shaky and high.

"My Darrel—the finest boy who ever lived—killed by an O'Day! Their worthless father ran cows for the Double Loop when I first started the spread."

Major Jefferson FitzLee removed his hat, stood by his son's body. The light from the big oil lanterns overhead gleamed on the silvery whiteness of his head. His face worked for a moment. Not a sound was uttered in the big room as he lifted his head and spoke in a voice abruptly strong and terrible.

"Until the last male O'Day is dead," said Major Jefferson FitzLee in that terrible voice, "I will not stop striking them. They will all die for this thing they have brought upon me, and only then will I be ready to go also!" It was a prayer, a promise, an oath to the son who lay at his feet, a warning to all who heard, and an order to those who drew the FitzLee bounty.

The Major clapped his hat back on his head, stooped, took the gun from the limp fingers of Darrel FitzLee. To Dave Cole he said tonelessly: "I think there are other O'Day's in town this evening."

Turning on his heel, Major Jefferson FitzLee walked out of the place with his blue-veined hand gripping his dead son's revolver.

Dave Cole drew his lips back over his teeth as he looked around at his men. "He means it," Dave Cole said. "Come on, boys."

They trooped after Dave Cole, hitching at their gun belts; and if there was law in the little cow town of Uvale that night it was only the law which the FitzLees were administering.

CASS O'DAY was the eldest, the biggest, the strongest and the wildest. Built like a mountain oak, he towered a head above his other brothers and most of the men with whom he came in contact. He was always laughing, always gay, always reckless and daring.

That was Cass O'Day, the wild man like his father before him, a lovable man like that father, too, who bore no man enmity for long and who lived as the days came, laughing, fighting, playing, singing and working with the fierce energy of two men on the Crazy Horse holdings of the O'Day's.

You liked Cass O'Day or you hated him, and when he was drinking heavily as he was tonight you found it hard not to like him. Cass O'Day outdid himself at such times. His laughter was the loudest, his mood the jovialest, his songs the merriest of the merry company which Cass O'Day gathered about him. And he had gathered many cowboys about him this evening in perambulations from bar to bar, with the Double Strike saloon housing them at the moment.

They were banked two deep at the bar about him, Anglo and Mexican, for Cass O'Day drew no line at friendship. Men from Uvale were there and men in from outlying ranches. When Major Jefferson FitzLee walked in the front door, Cass O'Day was just shouting jovially to the bartender for another round for the house.

Glancing over the heads of his companions, Cass O'Day spied the Major just inside the door. "Major FitzLee!" he called. "What'll you have?"

The Major did not reply. His face was set, stony. Under the white mus-

tache his mouth was a hard, bitter line and the revolver was in his hand as he walked toward Cass O'Day.

Several men on the fringes of the group looked at the Major's face and stepped quietly aside. It was the face of a dead man who walked with death.

Through the front door behind the Major, Dave Cole walked in. His right hand was hooked carelessly in his cartridge belt near the handle of his gun. His bright black eyes swept the room watchfully. The men who followed him spread out warily. The FitzLee riders were all gunmen, all touched to a more or less degree with the FitzLee arrogance. A man couldn't be around the Double Loop long without soaking it up.

Cass O'Day saw none of that, or if he did, it meant nothing to him. The world was a merry place and all men were friends of Cass O'Day this evening. With a sweep of his big arm he cleared a place around him.

"Let the Major in here, boys!" he called. "Like to have my neighbor at my elbow. Major, what'll it be?"

The Major stopped two paces away. The way was clear between him and Cass O'Day. He was tall and straight, but now Major Jefferson FitzLee had to look up to Cass O'Day. Major FitzLee's voice had the toneless edge of a keen knife slicing down through newly butchered meat.

"Draw your gun, Cass O'Day!" the Major said.

Cass blinked at him. His smile grew broader. "Don't want to draw my gun," he laughed. "Good enough where it is. Cork's all we're drawing this evening."

The deep peal of his laughter rolled through the room.

The Major said, "Draw your gun, Cass O'Day. I've come here to kill you!"

And no man who heard that voice, who saw the face which uttered it, doubted the truth of the words. Cass O'Day was suddenly standing alone at the bar with the Major in front of him. And still he did not see what those about him saw.

Cass O'Day laughed. "Don't think I want to die tonight, Major," he said. "I'm buying this time."

For the third time the Major said: "Draw your gun, Cass O'Day."

Still smiling, Cass O'Day said. "Sure, if it'll make you feel any better, Major."

He drew his gun; and when it was out and lifted Major Jefferson FitzLee emptied the remaining shots in Darrel FitzLee's revolver into Cass O'Day's body.

The smile was still on Cass O'Day's face as he started to fall; the bewilderment that took its place as he went down hardly mattered. Cass O'Day was dead by then.

Dave Cole's wire-like voice cut through the dinning reverberations of the shots. "If there's any friends here that'd like to take up the argument, we'll be glad to accomodate them."

Friends were there—and so were Dave Cole's men, watchful, waiting. No man broke the stricken silence.

Major Jefferson FitzLee looked down at Cass O'Day's body. His hand was steady as he twisted the end of his white mustache, his voice almost absent as he turned away.

"There should be another one of them around town tonight," the Major said. "The youngest. Cole, load this gun for me and we'll see."

CHAPTER TWO

Bullet Renegade

JOHNNY O'DAY finished his beer and drew a deep breath. The tinny piano with its haunting notes had taken him far away from the noisy clamor of the Crescent Bar.

The Double Loop headquarters of the FitzLee's was a good two hours' ride away. Perhaps Mollie FitzLee was there, perhaps not. He hadn't seen her in town this Saturday afternoon or evening. She had said, laughing, that she would be at church in the morning, and that a bit of religion might be good for Johnny O'Day himself.

Mollie FitzLee had known he would come. Mollie FitzLee knew a lot of things about Johnny O'Day. It was plain in her look, her smile, her manner on those chance meetings down along Wild Turkey Creek which formed the boundary line between the Double Loop and the Crazy Horse for several miles.

For some reason or other they both had found it necessary to ride along Wild Turkey Creek a great deal lately. Johnny's mind was on Wild Turkey Creek when Steptoe Grafton came through the back room of the Crescent, saw Johnny at the bar and limped hurriedly to him.

A bullet through Steptoe's right knee, in the dead of winter, had killed the horse under him and left him in two feet of snow, helpless, while the rustler who had fired it had ridden on to safety. Steptoe had been close to death under the bright still stars that bitterly cold evening when Johnny O'Day had found him, carried him to a Crazy Horse line cabin and brought him through. But the leg had been stiff ever since.

Steptoe Grafton was breathing heavily; he had run from the Double Strike. His square face was pale and his eyes had a feverish look as he caught Johnny's arm.

"The FitzLee's are lookin' for yuh!" Hoptoe panted. "My God, Johnny, hell's tuh pay! Darrel an' Dave Cole shot up yore brother Steve, an' before he died, Steve killed Darrel. The old Major's gone crazy an' swore tuh wipe out all the O'Day men. He just walked into the Double Strike an' killed Cass; an' now he's lookin' for you with Dave Cole an' his men behind him! Get outa town if you value yore skin!"

Thus tragedy and reality came to Johnny O'Day and wiped away the dream. They came so suddenly that he was stupid for a moment before the smashing shock of it.

"Steve dead—Cass dead?" Johnny said huskily, dully.

"Yeah!"

Steptoe Grafton was almost sobbing as he told of Cass O'Day's killing. He shook Johnny's arm, as if to break the spell. "I'll never see a face in hell like the Major's! He thought a heap of Darrel. He's only thinkin' about killin' O'Day's now. Fer God's sake, get goin', Johnny! Don't stand there lookin' like that!"

Johnny's face had gone hard, bleak. Lines sank in at the corners of his mouth and along his jaw. His gray eyes, which had been more used to dreaming than to stark, hard facts, lost their luster and became like two chips of stone in a face that seemed to have aged years in as many seconds.

"Steve and Cass—gone!" Johnny whispered. "Killed by the FitzLees!"

So a bitter, grim maturity came to Johnny, the last of the O'Day men, at twenty-two. And as it came, Major Jefferson FitzLee walked in the front door of the Crescent Bar with Darrel FitzLee's revolver in his right hand.

STEPTOE GRAFTON never saw the movement of Johnny O'Day's hand to his holster; but it moved; the gun was there in Johnny's hand, and Johnny was stepping out in the middle of the floor to meet the tall, aristocratic figure, stalking like the personification of doom toward him.

And if Johnny noted Dave Cole and the FitzLee men who came trooping in behind the Major, no sign of hesitation ap-

peared on the hard, bitter mask of his youthful face. Johnny's voice reached into every corner of the room as he stepped out.

"I'll kill the first man who reaches for a gun! Stop there!"

Neither Dave Cole nor his men had entered with their guns out. The order caught them unprepared. Dave Cole, at their head, took one look down the length of the room at the slightly crouching figure with the big Colt held on the door—and on Dave Cole—and Cole stopped short.

The legend of the O'Day's prowess with their weapons, if given a fair chance, bore fruit in that moment. Johnny O'Day was supposed to be the best shot of them all.

Major Jefferson FitzLee stopped also. Johnny took a step toward him, sliding in the wary crouch which had taken him away from the bar. His thumb had hooked back the hammer of the single action Colt, his finger was tense on the trigger.

"I'll give you one step more, one move of that gun," said Johnny to the Major, "and then I'll drop you! Understand me?"

Steptoe Grafton had slid behind the end of the bar. The other men in the room had scattered back against the walls, several even diving over the bar. Big Tim Doheney, tending bar, had ducked out of sight and come up with a sawed-off shotgun in his hands.

Major FitzLee spoke coldly: "I understand you, O'Day. I've come here to kill you."

Johnny grinned. His glance went past the Major to the doorway where Dave Cole stood out in front, a perfect target.

Dave Cole saw the grin. No man knew that Dave Cole shivered in his inner self, but all men there saw him edge back a step against the men who crowded behind him. Johnny O'Day's grin was a death-mask, bright with a sheer, cold threat that could not be doubted.

"Kill me?" said Johnny O'Day. "It'll take a better man than you and that gang of hired cut throats behind you to kill me, old man. I've trapped an' knocked in the head better skunks than you'll ever be, or ever were. I hear that drunken pup of yours and that hired gun-toter, Dave Cole, killed my brother Steve tonight before he drilled Darrel. And so you hunted up Cass an' killed him to make it even, an' then came lookin' for me."

"I'm going to kill you," Major Jefferson FitzLee stated evenly.

Johnny gave him a bleak, cheerless grin. "Only a FitzLee would tote a conceit like that. Three for one—an' any of the three of us a better man than your pup would have growed into. You and your tribe have carried a high hand an' no one's cared enough about it to call you before. I'm callin' you now. Here's one O'Day you won't kill, an' won't run out of the country. I ain't killin' you because I'm not a butcher and I've got the drop on you. But from now on it's an eye for an eye. Now turn around an' walk out of here before I forget an' throw lead in you!"

From behind the bar Big Tim Doheney spoke harshly: "I've got a thing or two to say about who gets shot up in here! The first man who starts trouble gets one barrel an' the second man gets the other barrel of this sawed-off. Johnny O'Day was a peaceable customer an' I'll help him stay that way, and be damned to all the FitzLee gunies that can crowd in the door! Hear that, you hell-raisin' rannys? I'm throwin' in with Johnny O'Day on this!"

Those in the doorway moved uneasily. "Thanks, Tim," Johnny said, without moving his eyes. "But stay out of this. It's my quarrel and I'll handle it."

Major Jefferson FitzLee did not even

turn his head or give sign he knew Tim Doheney was there behind the bar.

"I'll die satisfied when I kill you, O'Day," he said with a deep breath.

"You'll die," said Johnny, "because I'll have to kill you. And they'll tell—"

Johnny never finished it aloud. But inside he went cold, empty, frightened. From the moment Steptoe Grafton had told him of Cass and Steve there had been no time to think. Johnny was thinking now—of Mollie FitzLee, with her wind-blown hair and her smile like no other smile which had ever been given Johnny O'Day. What would Mollie FitzLee think of the man who killed her father, no matter what the provocation? What would she think of any O'Day now?

"Get out of here, damn you!" Johnny begged thickly. "I don't want to kill you!"

And then Major Jefferson FitzLee lifted the gun in his hand.

A MAN had little time to think in such moments; life hinged on a fleeting second—and with Johnny O'Day it was not only life and death but the look in Mollie FitzLee's eyes which had to be acknowledged and reckoned with.

Major FitzLee was going to kill Johnny if possible; but if the Major died first and Johnny lived, there would be nothing much to live for. You feel that way at twenty-two when you have dreams about a girl like Mollie FitzLee.

Johnny shot first. He had to. All the years of practice with that big belt gun were in the aim he took. The two guns spoke with one ear splitting crash of sound. But Johnny's bullet struck first, as he knew it would.

Darrel FitzLee's revolver spun from the Major's grip, firing wild. The Major's hand was suddenly useless and bloody. He stood unarmed and defenseless in the middle of the floor.

Johnny shot out one light overhead in the same breath. The thunderous bellow of Tim Doheney's shotgun blotted out the other light as the big barkeep acted instantly. Tim Doheney would do a thing like that for a friend.

The sudden blackness hid all movement. It hid Johnny as he ducked over to the bar and ran for the door in the back of the room. It was the only way he could avoid killing Mollie FitzLee's father. Behind Johnny in the center of the floor the Major made an effective barrier against any shots which Dave Cole or his men might have sent raking through the dark toward the rear door. And Dave Cole knew it.

Johnny heard him shout: "Get around to the back an' head him off! He won't have a horse out there!"

Johnny stumbled his way in the blackness to the back door, jerked it open and lunged out into the cool night air.

Dave Cole was right. Johnny's horse was at the hitchrack in front. He had gotten it from the livery stable an hour or so before, meaning to ride after the supply wagon in which Geiger, one of the Crazy Horse wranglers, had started back to the ranch before dark. It would be suicide to go out in front, nor would it be much better to go wandering around town afoot. Dave Cole and his men would scatter and look for him.

Johnny ran to the right, where for a hundred yards there was no direct way to the street other than through the buildings. Cass's big bay horse should be out in front of the Double Strike. The bay had more speed and endurance than any other animal in the O'Day remuda. With a few minutes start, the bay could stay ahead of any FitzLee man.

The most direct way to the street was through the Double Strike. Johnny opened the door, stepped into the back room, and stopped short.

They had carried Cass into the back room. He lay on the floor with a strip of canvas over him, boots and one hand visible. Cass, who would never laugh, never sing, never ride again.

Johnny said: "Cass!" from a throat that was suddenly tight and hurting. He stooped, touched the still hand, and went on into the bar, swallowing hard at the lump in his throat.

Only a barkeep and several drunks in the big room. Everyone else had followed the FitzLee men into the street to see what would happen. The barkeep recognized Johnny.

"Hell!" he said. "I was waitin' to hear that they'd got you, too."

"No," said Johnny, "they didn't get me."

"I'm sorry, Johnny. It was murder. No other word for it."

Johnny nodded as he went to the front door. "This isn't the last of it," he said.

Few men were out in front. The center of attraction was further along the street toward the Crescent Bar. But, as the search spread out, the crowd was spreading, too, filling the street as it drifted back toward the Double Strike. No one nearby at the moment looked like a FitzLee man.

The bay was there at the hitchrack, among a dozen or so other horses. Johnny walked out to it. For a moment he wasn't recognized. Then, as he swung into the saddle, a man in front of the next building yelled:

"There he is! Johnny O'Day! They ain't got him yet!"

The bay was out in the street when the first shot was fired; and the first rallying yell raised for the FitzLee men. Johnny looked behind as he bent low and rode hard to the end of the street.

The crowd was rolling back. Men—FitzLee men, of course—were running toward the hitchracks, and a few scattered shots came after him.

His last sight, as the road curved through the one story adobe Mexican houses on the fringe of town, was of horsemen gathering in the street.

CHAPTER THREE

Night of Fury

JOHNNY slashed hard with the *romel* ends. The cool night wind sang in his ears, the legs pistoning beneath him drummed the road in unbroken rhythm. The bay was running like a race horse, and with the right handling he could keep it up for an incredible length of time. The FitzLee's would have to kill their horses to get within shooting distance.

Two miles out, Johnny pulled into a walk, then to a stop. The silvery half disk of the moon hung high in the sky. Night insects droned and sang around him; the hard breathing of the bay pumped on the night. And that was all. Pursuit had vanished—or had not been there at all.

Puzzled, Johnny listened, watched. The minutes dragged. The bay breathed easier and then began to move restlessly.

Dave Cole and his men should be in sight by now, if they were following. They had meant to follow. Considering all that had happened there was nothing else for them to do, unless Major Jefferson FitzLee had restrained them.

The thought brought a cold smile to Johnny's lips. A bullet-shattered hand would not wipe out the hate, the inflexible purpose from the mind of that grim old man. He had set out to kill off the O'Days. He would kill them off if possible. The fact that one of them had wounded him and gotten away would only make him more determined. The Major's first order, Johnny knew, would be to follow, and keep following until the

last of the O'Day boys had gone the way of Darrel FitzLee.

And yet that order evidently hadn't been given.

Johnny rode on, more slowly, watching the road behind, stopping to listen now and then. He turned off the road onto a rough winding mesa track which cut back into the range country, spawning now and then a fainter track. One such track, miles further on, ended at the little group of houses and corrals in the grassy draw among the foothills where the O'Day boys had lived and prospered.

Johnny's mother was there now, and Steve's wife and two kids, and the home riders for the Crazy Horse, who were to have gone in town the next Saturday night.

It would be a sorrowful home-coming. Cass, Johnny thanked God devoutly, had never married. There would be no wife, no children to take the blow of his passing.

And, thinking that, he reined in Cass's big bay and listened. Far back the faint, distant roll of hoofs was vibrating on the night. Someone was riding hard after him.

A hundred yards ahead a narrow wash cut through the low gravelly ridge on the left where only naked *cholla* cactus and a stunted juniper or so thrust up into the pale silver moonlight. But in the sandy side of the wash, silver-gray *chamiso* grew thick and high clear to the road.

Reining off into the wash, Johnny crowded the bay into the *chamiso*, so that they blended, rider and horse, into the harsh, dry growth. Only his head and shoulders were visible, and he could duck down out of sight if necessary. It would take keen eyes in the thin moonlight to see the tracks in the sandy bed of the wash and make anything of them; and keener eyes to pick out the motionless mass crowded into the *chamiso*.

Drawing his gun, Johnny tumbled in fresh shells and waited. The pounding hoofs were sweeping nearer every moment. Johnny frowned slightly. One rider only was coming there on the road —but further back, other riders were faintly audible now. The FitzLee's must be coming, after all, riding so fast the slower horses could not keep up.

Johnny leaned forward tensely as the distant crack of a rifle drifted through the thin night air. An instant later the shrill, vicious keening of the bullet passed the head of the wash.

They were shooting at the first rider! He would be no FitzLee man; but it was a safe guess that those who followed him were. It became a running fight, for the rifle barked again and a second bullet whined across the mouth of the draw.

The lead rider shot back twice. He was very near now, galloping furiously. The rifle shots continued, closer each moment.

Johnny rode out into the open wash where the moonlight picked him out stark and clear. The road was not twenty feet away. He was waiting there with his belt gun ready, and wishing he had a rifle, when the lone rider burst into view.

THE rider was twisted in the saddle, firing back with a revolver. Two livid flashes burst from the muzzle of his gun as his horse plunged down the slight slope into the wash.

"Hi-yah!" Johnny yelled. And, for a moment, he thought the gun was going to be turned on him. The rider twisted sharply in the saddle, threw down on him, and the next moment reined savagely off the road in a shower of sand and plunged toward him.

Steptoe Grafton's voice came in a yell of hope: "Johnny?"

Steptoe's horse was dead beat, lathered, heaving. Steptoe's voice was hoarse with urgency. And when Johnny answered the

hail, Steptoe gasped out: "Three of the FitzLee men are comin' after me! Chased me outa town! I been ridin' like hell tuh catch you!"

Steptoe dragged out his rifle. "I only got the shells that are in the magazine!" he panted. "I been savin' 'em in case I needed 'em durn bad!"

"Put it up," said Johnny. "This is my fight. Get back of me an' we'll see how three FitzLees act when a gun's throwed right in their teeth!"

A touch of the reins as he spoke sent the bay along the *chamiso* bank to the edge of the road. Not a moment too soon, either. The three riders were almost to the wash. They must have seen Steptoe turn into it, must have known he might possibly be waiting there for them. Superior numbers and the way Steptoe had fled ahead of them probably accounted for their recklessness.

They hit the wash riding hard after Steptoe and swung into it like a hunting pack hard on the heels of a fleeing animal.

"Put 'em up!" Johnny yelled.

He saw the first man, who carried a rifle, lurch around in the saddle and swing the long barrel at him. Johnny had the Colt on him as the gun started to swing. He squeezed the trigger; the gun leaped in his hand, and the rifle pitched down into the sand. The rider followed. The plunging horse bolted up the opposite bank of the wash.

The two riders opened fire without stopping. Johnny felt the cold slap of a bullet across the upper muscles of his left shoulder. He heard Steptoe's gun bark beside him as he wheeled the bay out from the *chamiso*.

A second rider wobbled in the saddle, started to fall, dropped his rifle and saved himself by grabbing the horse's neck as it galloped on up the wash. The third man followed, evidently unwilling to stand and trade shots with two men bold enough to spring this deadly ambush.

Steptoe emptied his gun after him, swore disgustedly and yanked his rifle out of the saddle boot.

"Let 'em go!" Johnny called to him. "No use killing when we don't have to. We're only trying to save our hides."

"I'd like tuh get all three of 'em!" Steptoe swore, dismounting awkwardly. Johnny was already down, leading his horse to the motionless figure sprawled in the loose dry sand. The man stirred slightly, groaned.

"Seems to have a little life in him," Johnny commented. He knelt—and the next moment grabbed quickly at the man's holster, wrenching the gun the FitzLee man had started to draw. Unbuckling the man's gun belt, Johnny tossed it over to one side.

"Just like a snake," he remarked disgustedly. "You've got to cut their heads off before they stop being dangerous. He's got a bullet in him an' he wouldn't have a chipmunk's chance if he shot me, with you standin' there to plug him. An' yet he makes a play for me."

"One hundred proof FitzLee cussedness," Steptoe grunted. "How bad's he hurt?"

"Stomach, I think," Johnny said, looking. "Mister, where'd it hit you?"

"Damn yuh!" the man gasped. "If I had a gun, you'd see!"

HE WAS young, with a dark stubble on his thin cheeks and uncropped hair around his ears. A stranger. Men came and went on the FitzLee range, and most of them mixed little with the cowboys on the surrounding ranches.

Johnny said wryly: "You can't kill 'em and you can't cure 'em after they get a dose of the FitzLee high-and-mightiness. I reckon he'll last awhile. Might as well

bring him along to the ranch and do what we can for him."

"Leave him here!" Steptoe said harshly. "You got other things tuh do beside fool with a rattler like that. Major FitzLee has sent his men to the Crazy Horse. He was out back of the building, holding his busted hand when he gave the orders tuh Dave Cole. 'Plug up a wolf's den,' he says, 'an' you'll keep him out in the open where he'll leave tracks.' "

"Damn his black heart!" Johnny said aloud. "He sent Dave Cole to my mother and to Steve's wife?"

"He's crazy tonight, Johnny. All he's thinkin' about is gettin' you. Dave Cole said somethin' about the woman, an' the old Major never turned a hair. 'They shoulda spawned an' married better,' he says. 'It's their lookout. If you ain't man enough to do it, Cole, I'll get a foreman who is. Get there quick!' "

"Is that all he said?" Johnny asked.

Steptoe spat. "All I heard. I was standin' at the corner of the buildin' takin' it in. One of their men come runnin' an' bumped into me. I hit him in the head with my gun, dropped him, an' hightailed out front for my hoss. Some of the FitzLee men seen me comin' out. I guess they figgered I was goin' after you. I was just out of town when those three come after me. The rest have cut across country, I reckon, Johnny. It's rough ridin', but they'll make it before you do. An' they'll be waitin' for you. That's about what I was afraid of—you ridin' right into their guns. I did the best I could."

"I won't forget it," Johnny said gently.

He caught up the gun belt, picked up one of the rifles. Steptoe got the other out of the sand.

"You might as well take this fellow back to town," Johnny decided. "I'm going on to the ranch."

"I'm going with you!"

"This ain't your quarrel. Somebody else is going to get killed before the night is over. It might be you. Go back to town and keep healthy. You've evened us up."

Steptoe Grafton's answer was gruff. "Who said anything about making us even? I'm goin' tuh tag along an' see the fun. Save yore breath."

"You stubborn, pig-head galoot," Johnny grunted. "I'm proud to know you. Help me get this hombre up over my saddle. I wouldn't leave any man here to die like that. Hold my horse."

Johnny heaved the wounded man up, mounted behind him, and with Steptoe riding at his side, they took a more leisurely way along the narrow winding road.

"If Dave Cole and his men are at the ranch, they'll stick pretty close and wait for me to ride in to them," Johnny decided. "We'll turn off a couple of miles this side and circle around and drift in from the back. I want to get word to mother and Steve's wife and get the hands together. It looks like this is going through to a showdown, unless Major FitzLee gets some sense."

"He won't," Steptoe said with conviction. "He's got it all figured out that Steve is to blame for Darrel's death, an' he figgers it'll take three O'Days to even it up. He'll keep on until he gets his three."

JOHNNY said heavily: "I wish I knew the truth about Steve. He wouldn't kill Darrel FitzLee or any other man without cause."

"He had the cause—there was five aces in that stud game. Darrel accused Steve of ringin' in the extra ace an' went for his gun. He had been drinkin' steady an' was ready to be ugly."

"Five aces? Hell! Steve never rung in an extra ace on any game!" Johnny snapped. "He gambled straight, al-

ways. And it wasn't Darrel FitzLee, either. He wasn't much good—but he had too much pride to cheat at cards. Gimme the layout of that game as well as you know it."

"I was standin' behind the table," Steptoe said. "Here's what happened." He described in detail all that he had seen.

"Who dealt?" Johnny questioned slowly.

"Dane Walker, the house man. He had an ace showing, too, an' tossed it in the discard an' dropped outa the game."

"That," said Johnny, "sounds funny. I've seen Walker gamble. He can bluff as good as any man. If he had as much showing as Steve and Darrel, why didn't he stay in?"

"Well, he mighta knowed he didn't have a chance an' one of them did."

"Then, if he knew their cards, he was dealing a crooked game and knew there was five aces on the table. And if he knew that, he knew where they were."

"It don't make sense," Steptoe argued. "What'd Walker want tuh deal five aces for an' drop out? No percentage in that for him. He's cold-blooded. He wouldn't turn a hair tuh help his grandmother if there wasn't some cash in it for him."

"That's what I'm wondering," Johnny said. "What was in it for Dane Walker? What made it worth while for him to deal five aces just that way? He must have known it would end in trouble. Steve never bribed him, and Darrel FitzLee wouldn't. And if he did, he wouldn't go for his gun in the argument."

"I guess Dane Walker'll have tuh tell you that," Steptoe said.

And, grimly, Johnny said: "I think he will. Dane Walker dealt those cards to make trouble. If Darrel had been drinking and was ugly, Walker knew it. He knew there was apt to be shooting on the showdown. He must have dealt those cards to start the shooting. And he had a reason for doing it. I'll get it."

Steptoe said: "It'll take some persuadin' tuh make him talk."

"And that," said Johnny O'Day colorlessly, "he'll get. God help Dane Walker when I get my hands on him! He's cost me two brothers!"

The wounded FitzLee man lay across the saddle like a sack of meal. Now and then he groaned weakly. But that was all. Johnny made him as easy as possible in the cramped position and paid no further attention to him.

Uphill and down they rode, at times pushing through thick pinion and pine where vision was limited to a few yards and dead branches cracked under the horses' feet.

Solitude hung about them like a thick cloak. Back in these isolated foothills, no men would be wandering at this time of night. A small army could not spread a line thick enough to intercept a casual rider who might be coming through at any point. The FitzLee men would be in close to the ranch buildings where that rider would have to come finally.

They gained the higher slopes and started to angle down toward the little shallow valley which sheltered the Crazy Horse headquarters.

Steptoe Grafton stood up in the stirrups, looked ahead, exclaimed: "Do you see what I see, Johnny?"

The purple night sky over that crest was tinged with red. It deepened, brightened as they neared the top. Johnny, gripped by increasing forebodings, kept silent as he ducked branches and rode up the slope.

In the distance, in the home valley, flames were leaping to the sky over the home buildings, the corrals and haystacks. Dwarfed by distance, the fire burned in soundless, awesome majesty against the background of the night.

The leaping flames were visible. the

sparks spewing furiously up, the whole rising into a vast mushrooming column of smoke which towered tigh and drifted slowly off to the north on the night wind.

Johnny O'Day stared for a long moment. When he spoke, his voice was rough with a fury it had not expressed in all this night of tragedy and grief.

"Damn the black FitzLee heart! He's carried it to our homes an' our women! For this he'll go down on his knees and beg before I kill him—Mollie or no Mollie!"

"What's that?" Steptoe asked. "Mollie?"

"Nothing," said Johnny O'Day from a bleak and hopeless face. "There's nothing, any more, Steptoe. All gone. I'm riding down to the houses. You'd better not come."

"I've got two rifles an' a hand gun," said Steptoe Grafton. "A man who'd order that done, an' the men who'd do it, will get no more from me than they will from you. I'm ridin' down, too, Johnny. Let's go!"

CHAPTER FOUR

At the Bar 7

SO THEY rode down together out of the higher foothills. The flames of Johnny O'Day's home, where he had dreamed away his boyhood days, lighted a path for them through the night. A blood red path from which hope and dreams and laughter had been erased. There remained only violence, death, revenge.

Steptoe suggested without emotion: "Better chuck that skunk on the ground. He's only in the way now."

"No," Johnny refused. "He didn't help burn us out. He's a snake, but he's misguided. He came fighting an' he went down with a gun in his hand. I hate him, but he's not a FitzLee and I won't leave him out here to die."

Steptoe said no more. He busied himself making sure there was no sand in the barrel of the rifle he had picked up. Johnny did the same as he pushed the bay faster and faster.

They came down out of the hills, two men riding against many. The first wild onslaught of the flames on haystacks and pitch-filled pine logs and lumber had slackened into the steady devouring destruction which would not stop until the rising sun glinted on the smouldering white wood ashes.

And as they drew nearer they could see mounted men spaced at the edge of the red glare. The sullen crackle of flames gradually became audible, and grew louder as they topped the last wooded rise and looked across the gentle grassy slope to the burning buildings.

The haystacks were already dying down. The log buildings were sheathed in fire. The frame house—whose boards had been freighted forty odd miles by Johnny's father—was open to the night in spots, burning outside and in. The framework stood like a skeleton from which the board skin was peeling away, desolate, doomed, but stubborn with the lasting strength which Johnny's father had built into it in the high hope of his younger days.

The horsemen could be seen on the outskirts of the fire glare, dark and menacing as they moved restlessly about with rifles and hand guns ready for trouble.

"Do you see any women?" Johnny asked. He didn't know that it came out a hoarse plea for comfort.

But Steptoe Grafton did. Steptoe's voice was heavy as he had to say: "No sign of 'em, Johnny."

Johnny dismounted, put the rifle on the ground and dragged the limp form of the wounded man from the saddle to

the ground, also. The man groaned as Johnny laid him out. He was still conscious.

"I've done all I can for you," Johnny said. "The rest is up to the FitzLees. They'll find you here, for they'll be looking for their wounded when I'm through."

And Johnny swung into the saddle again, lifted the rifle, sighted through the edge of the fire glare at the nearest rider, and squeezed the trigger.

Cass's big horse moved restlessly at the sharp bark of the shot, then stood still at the pressure of Johnny's knees.

Calmly, methodically, Johnny sighted on another man. The second shot was low against the crackle of the flames before the first man leaned far out of his saddle, clutching vainly for support, and pitched down to the ground.

And the second man was reeling queerly when Steptoe Grafton opened fire with one of the two rifles he carried.

The watchful waiting of the FitzLee men became a sudden rout of confusion. Shouts of warning broke out. Horses reared, bolted as spurs were driven deep. Other shots cut through the night from different points about the burning buildings. Another FitzLee man fell.

Johnny emptied the rifle, hurled it to the ground, drew a short gun from his hip. But for the moment, he had no use for it as he rode close to Steptoe.

"Hear those shots?" he called. "The FitzLee's aren't doing that! Some of our men must be around here!"

Steptoe snapshot at a vanishing target, missed, lowered his rifle and spat. "Good enough," he said. "We'll need 'em when Dave Cole gets his men together."

"We'd better move out of here," Johnny decided. "They're apt to close in on us. Most of the shots came from the other side of the corrals where that little rise of ground sticks out near the windmill."

He rode that way, keeping in the shelter of the trees. The firing stopped, and presently Johnny left the trees and rode through the open, past the windmill, toward the tree-covered tongue of higher ground.

"It's me—Johnny!" he shouted from cupped hands—and rode on for a moment not sure what would happen. Perhaps bullets would cut him down there in the open—as the FitzLee men had been dropped.

THEN an answering shout—and a man showed himself at the edge of the trees with a rifle in his hand, and then another and another. All afoot, waiting. As Johnny rode up, the rasping voice of Hank Stevens, top-hand, greeted him.

"Glory be, you showed up, Johnny! We figgered it must be you an' the boys when the shootin' started an' we seen a couple of them dirty dogs get hit."

"Where's my mother an' Steve's wife and kids?" Johnny asked.

"On their way to that northwest line cabin, Johnny. It's nearest. Geiger had just got back with the wagon when hell started poppin'. They came whoopin', yellin' an' shootin'. Stopped and fired the haystacks as they came. Your mother told Geiger to get the wagon over in the trees and told off a couple of boys to get Steve's kids outa the house. In half a minute they were on their way.

"Your mother knowed it was trouble, Johnny. She told us to get our rifles an' plenty of shells, but they cut us off from the bunk house. We got two rifles, three six-shooters an' a few cartridges. That's all. They run off the hosses an' our ridin' gear is burnt. It's a hell of a mess. As soon as we saw the wagon on its way, I brought four of the boys back here to see what we could do. We was trying

to figure out something when you started shooting."

Hank Stevens looked past Johnny and Steptoe. "Where's Cass and Steve? I figgered you'd be together."

Johnny dismounted. He looked at the four men who stood before him with the fire glare in their faces. Hank Stevens, tall, rawboned, as honest and faithful as his angular mustached face looked. A better man than most tophands would ever be.

And Buck Sayles, chunky, cheerful, tireless in the saddle. Buck was not cheerful now. His round face was set, his eyes were squinting angrily.

The other two were Shorty and Slim Conners. Two brothers. Shorty the oldest, careful and methodical, in keeping with the gray which was beginning to fleck his black hair early in life. Slim, years younger, as gay and carefree as Cass had been.

All four of them good hands, good friends. It was like that on the Crazy Horse. And now as they looked at Johnny's face, they fell silent. Johnny said tonelessly: "Cass and Steve are dead." And Johnny told them in his flat, colorless voice.

Slim Conners bunched a knobby fist. "I thought I made out Dave Cole in that bunch of riders, but I wasn't sure. Didn't seem like it could be. Johnny, we're with you."

Hank Stevens drew a deep breath. "There's only one way to deal with a locoed hoss," he said. "Kill it. I reckon we might as well get some ridin' gear together an' settle this quick. I been here on the Crazy Horse eighteen years. I don't aim to be run off now. How about it, boys?"

"Hell, no!" they chorused.

None of the FitzLee men had appeared. The flames started to die down in solitude and quiet. "Funny," Johnny remarked presently. "Looks like they've run off."

Buck Sayles snorted. "They're three to one. Why should they?"

"They didn't know who we were," Johnny said. "I'll go see." He skirted the little valley in the shelter of the trees which surrounded it. "They're gone," he said to his men. "Let's get over to the line cabin."

JOHNNY'S mother was stooped with the years—hard years, many of them, but her eyes were dry, her voice steady as she faced them in the single, low-ceilinged room of the little cabin.

"My two boys are gone. Tears won't bring them back," she said, moving only the fingers of her work-worn hands. "I loved and raised them. I'm only an old woman now. This is a man's business. But Jeff FitzLee has a daughter and relatives left. I've only Johnny. Don't let them take him, too."

Hank Stevens spoke slowly. "They won't get Johnny, ma'am. I'll see to that."

Mrs. O'Day looked at the grizzled oldster. "I'll sleep better for that, Hank. You've never failed us yet. Now you men get out and let me put Steve's wife and kids to sleep. They—they need rest."

Outside, he directed the construction of a lean-to, a small fire to drive back the night chill. A huge pot of coffee helped. They talked long and earnestly before they turned in for a little sleep.

"The law won't help us," Johnny told them. "You all know the FitzLees had Douglas elected sheriff. He's their man. They'll be plenty to swear Steve was in the wrong and that Cass drew his gun first. If we get tangled up with the law, we're licked. I'll be a dead man, our cattle will be run off, and the O'Days will be done for before anything can hap-

pen. That's all Major FitzLee wants."

Hank Stevens was troubled. "We ain't got enough men to whip the whole FitzLee tribe, Johnny. Maybe you'd better hide out for awhile an' let the old man calm down."

"I'll settle with him in my own way," said Johnny. "Meanwhile, I've got other things to do. In the morning all of you take the women and kids over to the Bar 7. It's twenty miles, but they'll be comfortable there."

Shorty Conners spat a thin brown stream of tobacco juice on a glowing ember. "What'll you be doing?" Shorty questioned.

"I'm riding back to town," Johnny said. "Steptoe Grafton's going, too—but not with me. I'm not healthy company right now."

Hank Stevens smoothed one end of his drooping brown mustache. "I'll just tag along an' watch how healthy it'll be—seeing as I made your mother a promise. Don't try to argufy me out of it, Johnny."

CHAPTER FIVE

Snake Tracks

SUNLIGHT lay bright on the dun-colored adobe walls of Uvale when Johnny O'Day and Hank Stevens rode into town. There was peace on the surface and brooding expectancy underneath. Uvale was holding its breath, waiting. . . .

Their faces were impassive, but their eyes were watchful as they rode into the dusty main street. Johnny said quietly: "Lots of people in town this morning, Hank."

Hank spat to one side and brushed the backs of his hand across his mustache. "Uh-huh. Bunch of buzzards driftin' in. Some folks can smell trouble clean across a county."

Horses stood at the hitchracks, buggies, wagons had been driven into town. Men and women were in the open, and not all of them could have claimed to be coming to and from church. They waited, they talked in low tones; and when Johnny and Hank rode calmly along the street, tension rolled up behind them like the sputtering advance of a burning trail of powder.

Voices stopped, heads turned. Those who would ordinarily have called a casual greeting held their tongues. There was something about the calm progress of the two riders which discouraged speech.

Hank Stevens said: "I wonder if some friend of the FitzLees'll take a shot at us?"

"Not in daylight, with everyone looking. See any of the FitzLee outfit?"

"Nope," said Hank, squinting around. "They're lyin' low or stayin' out of town. Looks kinda queer to me."

"I think," said Johnny, "that Major FitzLee will hold his hand until he's buried his son. They'll have Cass and Steve at Tucker Gantt's, I guess. I'll stop there first."

Tucker Gantt owned the livery stable, was the veterinarian; and at one side of the livery stable were two adobe rooms of Tucker Gantt, undertaker. Steve and Cass were in there. The business did not take long.

"Caskets," said Johnny. "The best you've got. Bring them to the Bar 7."

Tucker Gantt was fat and bald and mournful. He did not try to hide his surprise. "The Bar 7, Johnny? I figgered you'd want 'em brought to your home."

"They have no home to come to," Johnny said woodenly. "Bring them to the Bar 7."

Outside, Hank called: *"Johnny!"*

There was an urgency about the call. "I'll see you at the Bar 7," Johnny said to Tucker Gantt, and stepped hurriedly

outside where Hank Stevens waited in the saddle.

Hank had swung his horse around and was facing half a dozen horsemen who had just ridden up. The rifle which had been held loosely in Hank's gnarled hands now lay across one elbow, carelessly, so that its muzzle covered the street.

Hank did not take his eyes off the riders.

The rifle which Johnny had carried into Tucker Gantt's shifted the merest bit, ready for action, as he looked up into Dave Cole's thin, sharp face. The other men were FitzLee men, too. They sat warily in their saddles, looking from Hank Stevens' rifle to Dave Cole. No man put a hand to his gun, and yet Johnny had the feeling that they were waiting for orders.

Dave Cole grinned slyly; if he felt any emotion beside careless swagger, he did not show it.

"Put up the gun," he said, settling himself comfortably in the saddle. "This is Sunday an' we're in town on peaceable business."

Hank Stevens spat, did not take his eyes off the FitzLee foreman.

"It better be peaceable right now," Hank said calmly. "You're the first jasper I'll get, Dave Cole, if one of them damn gun-toters behind you so much as wiggles an ear."

Dave Cole grinned slyly again. "They won't," he said. "We rode in on business. You two are free to hole up at the Crazy Horse an' make medicine."

Dave Cole's smile widened as he wheeled his horse toward a buggy which just then drove up beside the FitzLee men. And Johnny O'Day, looking into the buggy, felt his heart turn over and go weak.

MOLLIE FITZLEE was in the dusty buggy, her pale face like an ivory cameo. The same little, proud, imperious tilt to her head was there as she got out. They met on the walk. Mollie stopped. Her head came just to Johnny's shoulder. Her eyes were blue, clear blue, scornful, antagonistic.

"It's Mr. O'Day, isn't it?" she said to him. "With a gun in his belt and a rifle ready to use."

"I'd probably be dead by now if I didn't have them," Johnny said bitterly.

She was no less bitter. "In here my brother is waiting to go home in a box. Killed by a card cheat. My only consolation is that Darrel killed him, too."

"Only a FitzLee would find an excuse for murder!" Johnny said coldly, furiously. "Steve never cheated at cards in his life! And only a FitzLee would send gunmen to burn out women and children!"

"What do you mean?" Mollie FitzLee demanded.

Dave Cole spoke from his horse. "You'd better go in, ma'am, an' let us handle this."

She silenced him with a gesture of her hand. Johnny was already speaking. "Last night we were burnt out, houses, haystacks, everything. My mother and Steve's wife and kids are at the Bar 7. They haven't any home."

Mollie FitzLee turned to Dave Cole. "Do you hear what he is saying?"

"Yes, ma'am. Fancy tale, ain't it?"

"Did—did our men do anything like that?"

Dave Cole looked surprised, injured.

"Why, no, ma'am. Ask any of the boys here. We were chasing O'Day there, after he shot up your father. If there was any fire out to their place last night, most likely it was an accident."

Hank Stevens uttered a furious sound in his throat. "Durn your mangy hide!" he choked. "I got a mind to put a bullet in you for that!"

Dave Cole shrugged slightly as he looked down at Mollie FitzLee. "You

see," he said. "They think gun talk covers everything. I'll have to warn him, ma'am, that if he starts anything, we'll have to protect ourselves. Maybe you better go on inside."

"Watch it, Hank!" Johnny warned. And he said to Mollie FitzLee: "There'll be no shooting here unless your men start it. Count noses when you get back an' see who's killed and who's wounded. No Double Loop man was wounded here in town; but several were at the ranch. They were taken away before this morning."

"I have seen no wounded men at the ranch, except my father."

"Somebody must have performed a miracle then," Johnny said with cold politeness. "Tell your father he'll hear from me."

None of the FitzLee men moved as Johnny swung into the saddle. Mollie FitzLee was standing there quite still and white before Tucker Gantt's place as they rode off.

HANK STEVENS spoke first. "She didn't seem to know we'd been burnt out, Johnny."

"She wouldn't have cared if she had," Johnny said in the flat dead voice. "They're all alike. All FitzLee's."

"Kind of sweet on her, wasn't you, Johnny?"

"Once," said Johnny. "That was before I knew what they were like."

"*Mmmmm*," said Hank. "She talked a mite blood-thirsty, but I'll bet she wouldn't hurt a kitten. She's been upset—bad, since you last seen her. An' she don't know the whole story. Hell, Johnny, we don't know it ourselves. That's what we got to do here in town this morning."

"Are you taking up for her?"

"Nope," Hank denied. "I think she's a downright selfish, no-account, chip off a proud, worthless block. She'd probably put a bullet in yore back quicker'n Dave Cole. She looks to me like—"

"Shut up!" Johnny exploded. "I don't want to talk about her!"

"Don't blame you a mite," Hank agreed meekly. A faint smile touched his angular face.

Saddle gear creaked softly as they walked the horses down the street. Not so many people were visible now. Hank chuckled softly. "They're huntin' cover. Ain't just sure when the lead'll start flyin'."

He cleared his throat. "Notice Dave Cole denied burnin' us out? Seemed mighty sure his men'd back him up, too."

"I was thinking about that," Johnny muttered.

Hank mused: "Funny she didn't hear it from her old man."

"You can't figure what a skunk'll do. I wonder where Steptoe Grafton is?"

"Ought to be around some'eres," Hank said. "He had two hour start. I guess he's took to cover to see what he can pick up about Dane Walker. That fish-eyed card shark ought to be out of bed by now, even if he does work half the night. Let's see if he's in Jack Diamond's. I need a drink, anyway."

They left their horses at the end of the long hitchrack, walked into the long cool interior. A hum of conversation died away, then started again, haltingly, as they walked to the bar.

Johnny said: "Howdy, Dan . . . Hello, Johnson," nodding sober greetings to several he knew as he breasted the bar beside Hank.

They leaned their rifles against the bar front. In the mirror, Johnny could see the card tables. Dark stains on the floor marked the one where Steve had sat. Johnny sipped his beer slowly, knowing that men along the bar were watching his face in the mirror.

No games were running today. Dane Walker was not in the place. Jack Diamond, the owner, was not there, either. But when the glasses were almost empty, Diamond walked in.

He was a pudgy man, not tall. Sloping fat shoulders supported a thick, powerful neck that seemed to rise straight up into the back of his head. Today his usual garb of shirt sleeves was replaced by a black Sunday suit, a lavender shirt and a bright red tie.

Jack Diamond saw them, came to them, solemn, sympathetic. "Mighty sorry there was trouble in her last night, Johnny. I sure hated it. Have one on the house with me?"

Hank surly refusal was growling in his throat when Johnny spoke calmly. "We'll have two beers—over at one of the tables."

"Two beers and a whisky," Jack Diamond told his barkeep, and led the way over to a table.

As they sat down, he eyed the rifles. "You two look primed for trouble."

"We're not hunting trouble," Johnny said calmly.

The barkeep set the drinks down. Diamond tossed his whisky off, ignored the chaser. His eyes were slightly squinting under heavily ridged brows. His nose, Johnny noticed, was thick at the base; his lips were extra thick, too. Usually they were smiling at customers. Now, sober, they were gross and hard.

Diamond tapped softly on the table with thick, stubby fingers. "I'd have made a bet you were looking for trouble," he said.

"Nobody's asking you to bet," Hank grunted over his beer. "Why do you think we're on the wolf?"

Diamond shrugged, turned to Johnny. "Seeing what happened. You got a raw deal, Johnny. Your two brothers—your place burnt out—if that don't call for a fight, I dunno. Maybe not."

"Who said our place was burnt out?" Johnny asked calmly.

"Hell, it was, wasn't it? I've heard talk out on the street this morning."

"You're liable to hear anything," Johnny said. "By the way, where's Dane Walker? I want to ask him some questions about Steve."

Diamond shrugged again. "Hard to tell where Walker is. His time's his own, off work. He got drunk last night. I guess he's sleeping it off in his room over at Mrs. Green's boarding house."

As they left after a few moments, Hank snorted: "What'd you want t'drink with him for? He just wanted to find out what we was up to."

"Sometimes, Hank, it pays to give a man something to turn over in his mind. Did you notice he was all for egging us on into more trouble?"

"Uh-huh."

"And I'm wondering how he knew our place was burnt out. The ranch is too far from town for the fire to be seen. It's back where nobody'd be riding by. Dave Cole and his men evidently just came to town—and they don't seem to be talking about it."

MRS. GREEN'S boarding house was a big, two story frame building a block off the main street. Rooms and meals made it more or less a hotel. The fat, hospitable Mrs. Green was an institution, who knew everybody and most things that happened in a fifty mile radius.

She bulked in the doorway, radiating sympathy and helpfulness from her broad, kindly face. "I wisht I could tell you where Dane Walker was, but I can't," she told Johnny. "He didn't come in last night—his bed wasn't slept in."

"And you haven't heard where he went?"

"Not a word," Mrs. Green declared emphatically. "Mr. Grafton was here about an hour ago, looking for him. I've asked several parties. Mr. Walker usually takes Sunday dinner, and I wanted to know whether to set a place for him. Was there anything you wanted him told if he comes in?"

"Nothing," said Johnny. "We may be back later. If he comes in, don't tell him we were here."

On their horses once more, Johnny looked at Hank and Hank looked at him. "There's one for you to puzzle out," Johnny said. "What happened to Walker?"

Hank settled himself in the saddle and spat. "We can guess all day an' not get anywhere. I wonder where Steptoe went? He's been nosing around after Walker. Hell, ain't that him ahead there?"

Hank put two fingers in his mouth and emitted a piercing whistle. A horseman riding on the main street heard it, looked in their direction, and reined around toward them.

It was Steptoe Grafton, and he started talking as soon as he reached them. "I was lookin' for you two. The FitzLee's are in town!"

"We seen 'em," Hank said. "They ain't on the prod just now. Find any trance of Dane Walker?"

Steptoe grinned. "I think so. Thought I was going to get a bullet in me when I got near him. It's funny, too. I can't figger it out. After tryin' at Jack Diamond's an' Mrs. Green's, a Mexican I know let on he might remember something if he had a drink to give him strength.

"I bought him a drink," said Steptoe, "an' he remembered then as how he was down with a load of red rye behind Jack Diamond's place last night when Dane Walker was helped out the back door by Pablo Ruiz, the Mex roustabout. Walker was kickin' up a fuss, sayin' he wanted to go to sleep. Ruiz was tellin' him he was headed straight for bed, an' all the sleep he wanted. They headed off back of Jack Diamond's place toward Pablo Ruiz's house. That's why I figgered it was funny. How come Ruiz got so kindly he took Walker to his home instead of dumpin' him at Mrs. Green's, when it'd been easier and quicker to deliver him there? Ruiz ain't workin' today either, so I rode over to Ruiz's house to pay a little call."

Steptoe sighed. "That scar-faced Mex met me at the door an' was about as friendly as a desert sidewinder. He didn't want no visits today. I made out as like I was a mite drunk an' insisted on comin' in. He shoved me out," said Steptoe, "an' cussed me out in Mex, an' drawed a gun an' said he'd ventilate me for six generations back if I stepped in his door again. In fact," said Steptoe, "he just about let on he didn't want company today. So I gave him *buenos dias, adios, vaya con dios,* an' clumb on my hoss an' went lookin' for you two."

Johnny said thoughtfully: "Ruiz is Diamond's man. He wouldn't make a move like that without Jack Diamond knowing it. Diamond told us he didn't savvy anything about Walker. He was lying.

"Hank, we'll ride over and see why Ruiz don't want any visitors today. Steptoe, you keep on around the block and make out you don't know us. Can't tell what's ahead. The less folks know about you helpin' us, the more you can do if we need you."

Following Steptoe's directions, they located the house without any trouble, a small unplastered, single-story adobe set down in the Mexican quarter. The front door was closed. Johnny dismounted, knocked; and a moment later the door was opened part way and a voice snapped:

"W'at you want?"

CHAPTER SIX

The Law Takes a Hand

RUIZ was a big man for a Mexican, heavily built, and there was more muscle than fat about him. His dark, flat face bore a purple scar across the left cheek. He was scowling.

"I want to talk to you," Johnny said. "Open the door."

"I don't want to talk to you!" Ruiz retorted. He started to close the door.

Johnny blocked it with his foot. "Don't try that," Johnny said. "You heard me say I wanted to talk to you."

Ruiz kicked at the foot. Johnny lunged against the door. It flew in, knocking Ruiz back.

"Madre de dios!" the Mexican howled. "Get out before I keel you!" He lurched back toward the door, dragging at a gun which hung at his hip.

Johnny hit him on the jaw. Ruiz fell heavily on his back, but managed to get the gun out of the holster. Johnny kicked the weapon from Ruiz's hand.

Ruiz sat up, holding his sprained wrist. Glaring at the gun in Johnny's hand, he got to his feet, muttering. "W'at you want?" he demanded. "I don' ask for company. I don' want to talk. Me, I am home here resting an' you break in the door an' take over my house. For this I go to the sheriff!"

You can go to the devil, if it'll make you feel any better," Johnny said calmly. "No, keep your eyes off that gun on the floor. Where's Dane Walker?"

"I don' know. W'y you come here for Dane Walker? Thees my house. He don' live here!"

"Who said he did? Open that door there an' let's see what's on the other side. Jump!"

Pablo Ruiz took one look at Johnny O'Day's face; the new face he had never seen before. Unwillingly, but hastily, he turned to the door and opened it.

Looking past him, Johnny said: "I thought so. Get in there!"

He prodded Ruiz into the next room with the gun barrel, prodded him over to the sagging wooden bed across the dim room, where Dane Walker lay on his back in the clothes he had worn the night before.

At first sight Walker seemed asleep. His hard face was relaxed. His breathing was regular. Johnny shoved Ruiz aside and shook the gambler. Walker stirred slightly, groaned faint protest, and slept on. Johnny slapped Walker's face, shook him roughly. It did no good.

"Hell!" said Hank disgustedly. "No man's got a right to sleep like that."

"Liquor never made him like this," Johnny stated. He swung on Ruiz. "He's drugged, isn't he?"

Ruiz shrugged sullenly. "I don' know. He come here to sleep."

"He ain't sleeping; he's unconscious," Johnny said. "Who told you to bring him here."

"No one," Ruiz muttered.

Johnny stepped close, shoving his gun into the Mexican's middle. Ruiz backed off, his mouth opening silently.

"I've got a cure for a bad memory!" Johnny said. "Talk fast, Ruiz, or the señoritas won't know that face when I get through with it."

"Before God, señor!" Ruiz wailed. "Of thees I don' know moch! Señor Diamond tell me to bring Walker here, an' eef he wakes up to geev him drink from that whisky bottle there. For that I get feety dollar; an' eef I let anyone es-see Walker, I get a bullet. *Dios,* w'at I do? Señor Diamond ees boss. Me, I am poor man."

Hank took a pint flask from a battered table by the bed, sniffed the red-eye in it.

"Let Ruiz take a couple of long drinks out of it," Johnny said grimly.

"I don' want to drink!" Ruiz protested.

"Guzzle it down!" Johnny ordered unfeelingly. "If he won't take it peaceable, Hank, pour it down his throat."

Ruiz took the bottle with a shaking hand, tilted it, gulped three times before Johnny allowed him to stop. Choking, Ruiz pushed the bottle back at Hank.

"I'll go to the livery stable an' get a buggy," Hank said. "We'll ride Walker out on the mesa an' work on him. Hell —who's that?"

Hank swung to the wall where he had leaned his rifle. Horses had galloped up to the front of the house, men were dismounting quickly.

JOHNNY ran into the next room. His rifle was there inside the door. Just as he caught it up the door burst in. Dave Cole entered, a gun in his hand, calling: "Ruiz!"

The Double Loop foreman saw Johnny in the same instant and whirled to face him, lips drawing back in a snarling grin. On his thin face murder was plain.

Three steps separated them. No time for the gun on Johnny's hip. He hurled the rifle straight out with both hands. It struck Cole's gun arm as Cole fired. The shot missed, and Johnny was on him, grabbing the gun, pushing it aside, wrestling Cole back against the wall beside the doorway.

A second shot blasted beside them. Hank Stevens bawled: "Stay out, all of you!"

That was all Johnny heard. He was trying to get the gun away from Cole. The Double Loop foreman was battling furiously to knock him back, to swing the gun muzzle in close. Johnny had both hands on it. Cole beat at his face.

Johnny stamped hard on the man's instep. Cole howled with the pain, went weak for an instant. Johnny tripped him, twisted the gun arm hard as Cole went down.

The big Colt blasted again. The flash singed Johnny's sleeve; hot gasses drove through his skin, but the gun came away in his hands as Cole's arm twisted almost to the breaking point.

Hank slammed the door shut. "I'll hold his dirty gun-toters outside!" he yelled.

Johnny hurled the revolver across the room, grabbed Dave Cole by the shoulder and yanked him to his feet. And Cole, disarmed, robbed of the killing he had been so confident of, staggered back against the wall, suddenly pale.

Johnny moved toward him, breathing heavily. "So you're in on this with Ruiz and Jack Diamond?" he said.

Dave Cole licked his lips. "On what? I—I came here to see Ruiz. I thought you were out to shoot me."

"Shoot you?" said Johnny, thinly. "That'd be too easy. I'm going to kill you with my bare hands. Lift your fists, Cole!"

"It's two against one. I ain't got a chance."

"You've got more chance than our women had when you burnt the Crazy Horse out last night!" Johnny said, and he smashed Cole in the face.

Cole fought like a rat in a corner, viciously, savagely, with the knowledge that nothing else would do. He was strong, quick, and he had lied when he said he couldn't fight.

His fist whipped to Johnny's cheek, snapping Johnny's head back. Ducking in close, Cole struck him in the middle.

Johnny took it, and stood toe to toe and slugged with cold, savage blows that never stopped, no matter where Cole hit him. He began to grin—that bleak, death's head grin which had been on his face in the Crescent Bar the night before.

Before than grin Dave Cole gave back

across the room, gasping for breath as he tried to protect himself. His cheek was cut; blood began to trickle from his nose; one eye started to close. Johnny walked into him, smashing, slugging until Cole stumbled, went down to a knee.

Johnny jerked him up, knocked him down again. He barely heard a loud pounding on the door as he hauled Dave Cole up a second time and swung hard with all his weight behind it to Cole's blood-smeared face.

The shock of the impact traveled clear to Johnny's shoulder. Dave Cole went down before it and lay twisted on the floor without moving.

Dimly, as from a distance, Johnny heard a voice outside calling: "Open up or you'll get shot out!"

Hank Stevens turned a worried face. "It's the sheriff, Johnny," he said.

"SHERIFF?" Johnny panted.

"Yep. Douglas. He come up while you was workin' on Cole. He wants to come in."

"He's been damn careful to keep out of all this so far. All right, let him in."

Hank raised his voice. "I'm goin' to open the door, Douglas. Come in without any of those FitzLee killers at yore heels. We've took all we aim to off them."

Hank opened the door; he and Johnny stood watchfully with their six-guns ready while the sheriff stepped inside with his hands empty. Hank slammed the door again.

The sheriff was a commanding figure, towering over both of them. Someone had said he looked like a cannon and worked like a popgun. Despite the man's size his jaw was weak, his eyes were a watery blue and he had been born to take orders. He had found the man to give orders in Major Jefferson FitzLee. Like most men who were weak in that particular way, Douglas had a certain measure of courage, and was stubborn.

Scowling, he said: "What's going on here? What happened to Dave Cole?"

Hank chuckled. "He got hit by a tornado."

Douglas took off his big tan sombrero. His nose was slightly crooked, his ears stood out from the side of his big head. "You two do that to Cole?" he asked heavily.

"I did," Johnny said.

"Where's Ruiz?"

"He's probably gone out a window," said Hank. "We ain't had time to keep track of him. He was in the other room last I seen of him."

The sheriff stepped into the next room. He swore in amazement. "Ruiz is asleep in here on the bed with Dane Walker!"

"Asleep?" Hank marveled. "That stuff is horned lightin'! I guess he just can't stay awake on Sundays, Sheriff."

Johnny had followed the sheriff into the room. Pablo Ruiz was stretched full length beside Dane Walker, sleeping inertly. The sheriff tried to wake them both up, without success. He sniffed the whisky-tainted air.

"Drunk," he decided. "They can sleep it off here." He scowled at Johnny. "I came here for you, O'Day. I'm going to have to lock you up."

"Lock me up? What for?"

Douglas looked slightly uncomfortable. His watery eyes shifted away from Johnny's hard look.

"Lot of trouble last night," he said. "You shot Major FitzLee in the hand." Douglas added as an afterthought. "An' here just now you've gone an' beat up his foreman. I'm going to have to lock you up while I look into things."

From his post in the doorway, where he was watching the front door, Hank snorted. "You couldn't lock a jaybird on a pinion limb!"

"Shut up, Hank!" Johnny spoke curtly to the sheriff: "Kind of late looking up things, aren't you? How'd you know I was here?"

Douglas looked more uncomfortable. "I heard you was in town an' I been huntin' for you. Someone said they seen you ride this way. I'm straightenin' all this out as fast as I can. Meanwhile I'm gonna have to lock you up for a little. Better come along peaceable because I got half a dozen deputies out there, an' Dave Cole has got three or four men that are armed. You can't get away."

Conscious that Hank was watching him, Johnny looked at the bed for a moment, and then nodded. "I'll go," he agreed. "I guess even you won't let anything happen to a prisoner in your jail. Hank, you can look after things." Johnny glanced at the bed again.

"Mmmmm," said Hank. "Sure. An' here's a bottle that might come in handy. Sheriff, you don't mind if Johnny has a little comfort in jail, do you?"

Hank held out the bottle from which Ruiz had drunk. Relieved that there was no trouble, the sheriff nodded as Johnny took the bottle and slipped it in a pocket.

"I guess it's all right," Douglas assented. "Gimme your gun, O'Day."

"Hank can take it, an' my rifle," Johnny said coolly. "Let's go."

And as Johnny walked to the door he heard Hank warn the sheriff. "If anything happens to him, Sheriff, I'll settle with you myself. Don't forget."

"He'll be safe," Douglas promised. He was, it was clear, doing a thing that even he did not relish.

The sheriff stepped outside first, said: "All right, boys, there's no trouble."

They watched quietly while Johnny and Hank mounted, and then the men whom the sheriff had deputized rode after them to the little red brick jail with its barred windows.

Hank saw Johnny into the jail and then rode off. The sheriff locked Johnny in a cell, saying: "If there's anything you want, I'll get it," and went out.

CHAPTER SEVEN

On to the Double Loop!

THROUGH the single barred window of the cell Johnny could see across several weed-grown lots a small section of the main street. People were gathering there, talking, looking toward the jail. But they were quiet; there was no sign of trouble.

Johnny rolled a cigarette and smoked thoughtfully. He was looking out the window when he saw the dusty buggy of Mollie FitzLee pass along the main street, headed out of town toward the FitzLee's ranch.

Behind her rode several armed men; not as many as had come in with Dave Cole. Straining his eyes, Johnny was unable to see Dave Cole among them.

Through the rest of the day the jail was quiet. None of the other cells were occupied. Lon Marks, the regular deputy, brought a tray of food early in the afternoon. Marks was tall, gangly, loquacious. He lingered outside the cell while Johnny ate.

"How long do you aim to keep me in here?" Johnny asked.

"Derned if I know," Marks confessed, rubbing his chin. He lowered his voice. "Major FitzLee sent word to hold you. Douglas don't like it much, but he ain't gonna cross the old man. Don't let on I told you."

Johnny grinned thinly. "No danger. I figgered that out already. I came along just to see what they were up to. I guess I'm safer in here than out dodgin' FitzLee guns."

"I reckon so," Marks agreed. "Douglas

ain't skunk enough to let 'em come in here after you. He's keepin' everyone out."

The sun set; darkness fell, black, moonless. Marks and some cronies were playing poker in the jail hall. Johnny could hear them laughing, talking. He frowned, paced the cell. He hadn't counted on that poker game. He wondered if he had done the right thing by allowing himself to be locked up.

A gunfight at Ruiz's with the sheriff and the FitzLee men might have ended fatally for himself and Hank. Time had been needed to get at this mystery surrounding Dane Walker. By going to jail he had disarmed the FitzLees; they wouldn't be looking for trouble.

Hank's cautious voice under the window brought Johnny to the bars. "I got your hoss an' guns hid out near here. They took Dane Walker to the FitzLee ranch. Dave Cole drove him out in a wagon. Steptoe trailed it, seen it turn into the ranch road. I tried to get in to see you a couple hours ago, but Marks wouldn't hear to it. There's five of 'em playin' poker in there."

Hank's voice sounded worried.

"I never figgered on that poker game," he said. "They're all armed an' keepin' the front door locked. I can't get in to 'em. Where's that bottle?"

"Here," said Johnny. "I've been saving it until you showed up. Sit down on the ground an' make yourself comfortable. I want my supper."

Banging on the cell door brought Lon Marks; and fifteen minutes later the food Johnny demanded.

"I'll get you a couple of blankets before I turn in tonight," Marks promised.

Johnny grinned at him. "Thanks, Lon. I sure appreciate all this. Here's something you can pass around the table out there. I won't be drinking tonight."

Lon Marks took the bottle with gratitude. "Mighty nice of you, Johnny." He grinned. "I guess five of us won't feel it much."

"You never can tell," Johnny said. When Marks went back to the game with the bottle Johnny calmly set about eating his supper.

"Nice food," he said through the window to Hank.

Hank's voice floated mournfully in.

"Some jaspers has all the luck. I'm starvin' out here. Do you figger that stuff'll work?"

Johnny cocked his ear. "Not yet," he said. "Give it time. If I know them rannies, they killed the bottle soon as they got it."

Johnny finished the food, was half way through a cigarette before the conversation about the poker table died away; the jail fell silent, still.

HANK had already slipped around to the front. A moment later glass crashed. Hank hurried into the cell passage with the jail keys, tried several and finally unlocked the door.

"Good thing the front door wasn't barred," he said. "I'd have had to have got an axe. They had the keys inside the lock. I busted the window and reached into it. That bottle laid 'em low. We better hurry. The busted glass sounded loud."

Lon Marks and one of his cronies had leaned forward on the table and gone peacefully to sleep; another had slipped from his chair to the floor; the other two had gotten up, moved to different parts of the room before collapsing.

Hank and Johnny hurried outside and almost bumped into a man who was standing on the walk staring at the broken glass. Johnny drew his gun.

"Come here!" he said.

The man turned and ran instead. "Might have known he'd do that," Johnny

sighed. "Where's the hosses? The town'll be buzzing quick now."

Hank led the way across lots, behind some houses, and the horses were tied there in the darkness. They mounted, skirted the edge of town and were soon riding through open country.

"I sent Steptoe back to the Bar 7 to tell our boys to meet us at Arroyo Vaco," Hank said.

"Bueno," Johnny said absently. "Hank, I've been wondering why Dane Walker was carried to the FitzLee place. Didn't it strike you funny that if he stacked cards on Darrel FitzLee, he don't have any business around the Double Loop?"

"Hell—I never thought of that."

"Mollie FitzLee didn't savvy any wounded men around the place," Johnny mused. "They had all been taken away before we rode by our place this morning. They weren't brought to town or Steptoe'd hear about 'em."

"Major FitzLee'd have 'em brought to the Double Loop," Hank said flatly. "His cussed, ornery pride wouldn't let him do anything but take care of 'em."

"I'm trying to think," Johnny said, "where Dane Walker could be on the Double Loop. Not in the bunkhouse; not around the main house. They wouldn't cart him out to any of the FitzLee kin."

"If Dave Cole took the Double Loop road, he pretty near headed into the home place," Hank said.

"Seems so," Johnny agreed. "Wait—I got an idea. Back up the draw north of the Double Loop bunkhouse there's a couple of old log cabins that usta be used by married hands. My father an' mother lived in one the year before they quit the Double Loop an' took up land. Those cabins haven't been used for years, except when there's too much company around the ranch. Maybe—"

"I think you got an idea there, Johnny."

It took an hour and a half to reach Arroyo Vaco. By then the thin moon washed faint silver over the countryside.

A cautious hail issued from a clump of pinions to the left of the road.

"Hank—Johnny!"

"All right, boys," Johnny answered.

Seven riders came forth—Slim and Shorty Conners, Buck Sayles, Geiger, Steptoe Grafton and two men from the Bar 7. The Bar 7 had mounted them all well; every man had a rifle and six-gun.

Buck Sayles said: "We got going soon as Grafton brought word. Tom Winston on the Bar 7 wanted to bring all his outfit. After talkin' with your mother, he was for joinin' in to clean out the FitzLees. But she wouldn't let him until you sent word. They're ready to ride if you want 'em."

"Not tonight," Johnny said. "We've got too many now for what we've got to do. We ain't cleanin' out the FitzLees. It's more like robbin' a hen roost. But you boys all know that if shootin' starts, it'll be for blood. Don't take any chances. I'll ride ahead. I know the Double Loop. We'll keep off the road. Most likely they've got guards out. I would, if I had as much oneriness on my conscience as Old man FitzLee has. Let's go."

They rode for another hour after that; nine men, drifting through the faint moonlight almost silently. The Double Loop stretched far and wide, and night and distance gave all the cover needed.

Johnny circled wide, coming in from the north. They were full two miles from the Double Loop home buildings when they saw the twinkle of lighted windows. Johnny let his men gather around him there and said: "We'll cross an arroyo about a mile ahead. Hank an' Buck an' I'll go on alone from here. The rest of you drift slow after us. If you hear any shots, ride in fast."

The arroyo was shortly behind them. Johnny led his two companions on, watch-

ing landmarks carefully. He halted presently on the crest of a little ridge and pointed down through scattered pinions.

"The cabins are down there along the edge of the draw," he said under his breath. "I'll ride down alone. Don't come unless you hear my whistle."

Hank protested dubiously. "I don't like it, Johnny. Yore hair ain't worth a shed rattler's skin if you get caught out here alone."

"If the Major keeps his word, it ain't anyway," Johnny said. "They think I'm in jail. I'll be all right."

And he rode on alone, down through pinions into the grassy draw where two low, log cabins bulked darkly against the gentle slope on the left. Beyond the widening mouth of the draw the lights of the FitzLee home buildings could be seen plainly. The two log cabins were unlighted, silent. Unoccupied, Johnny guessed as he rode up to the nearest one.

"Hi-yah!" he called softly from the saddle—and the next moment he straightened as an answer came from the other cabin, fifty yards beyond.

"That you, Dave?"

"Uh-huh," Johnny answered, riding toward him.

From the dark door of the second cabin a disgusted voice spoke as he rode up. "This guy Walker has got the shakes. He says he's got to have a drink. He's keepin' the others awake. I been afraid to leave for fear he'd walk out on me. He wants to go back to Uvale. Say, where'd you get that hoss? . . . You ain't Dave Cole!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

Killers' Toll

JOHNNY had swung to the ground, was almost to the dark doorway where the speaker was standing. The man leaped back inside, started to slam the door, and Johnny drove his shoulder against it and knocked it back.

The next moment a gun roared in the blackness inside; the bullet clipped his leg; he fired at the flash and plunged inside. And a second shot clipped the hat from his head. He fired again.

A gun clattered to the floor. The dull thud of a body followed; then a groan.

"Walker!" Johnny called.

From his left a husky voice answered. "Here! Who is it?"

In the darkness Johnny heard dull stirrings. No one else threatened. He struck a match, saw bunks against the walls, men lying in them, three, four, five men. Walker was sitting on the edge of one, peering into the matchlight uncertainly.

As the match went out Johnny caught the gambler by the neck and hauled him to his feet. "Here—what's the matter? Leggo me!" Walker protested.

He had come out of the stupor, was shaky, but in full control of his senses. And fear was in his voice.

"D'you know me?" Johnny said, shaking him. "Johnny O'Day! Steve O'Day's brother! What about that fifth ace in the card game last night!"

"Don't savvy you," Walker gulped.

"Damn you!" said Johnny. "You ran in that ace. Jack Diamond's drugged you. Dave Cole brought you out here to the Double Loop. What's the answer? I'm ready to kill you quicker than Steve got his!"

"Take that gun outa my belly!" Walker gasped. "Is this the Double Loop? They wouldn't tell me. Said I'd been on a big drunk."

"You were drugged. Diamond did it. Ruiz had you in his house until Dave Cole brought you out here in a wagon."

Hoofs pounded up to the front of the cabin. Hank called: "Johnny!"

"All right, Hank! I've got Walker!"

Johnny shoved the gambler toward the door with a gun in his back. "We'll take you out where you'll talk with a rope around your neck!"

In the doorway Walker looked at the two other men and wilted.

"I'll talk," he said thickly. "If they drugged me, they're stackin' the cards on me. I won't stand for that. Jack Diamond paid me a hundred dollars to work that fifth ace in the game. I don't know why he wanted it. I gamble for a living. If the boss wants a crooked game, it's his business. I think Dave Cole knows something about it. He an' Jack Diamond have had their heads together a lot lately."

"I knowed it," Hank Stevens said with satisfaction. "What are we gonna do now, Johnny?"

From his horse Buck Sayles spoke sharply. "Men comin' hell bent for leather from the ranch. Mighty near a dozen of them! They heard the shots!"

"Put a rifle bullet over their heads," Johnny ordered. "Walker, climb on your belly across my hoss an' hang on."

Buck Sayles's rifle spoke. A loud yell drifted from the mouth of the draw. As Johnny swung into the saddle behind Dane Walker, he saw a dark bunch of horsemen scatter at the mouth of the draw and race toward them. Little stabs of red dotted their progress; and the shrill whine of flying lead zipped viciously through the night.

"This way!" Johnny yelled. He spurred behind the cabin, galloped up the sloping side of the draw into the trees. Buck Sayles and Hank rode close, ducking, dodging the low branches.

"Buck!" Johnny yelled. "Ride on an' find the rest of the boys. Keep shootin' so you'll be followed. Take the rest of the fellows an' draw these FitzLee men over toward the Crazy Horse! Don't mix with 'em more'n you can help."

"Okay!" Buck answered. He bent low and rode hard as Johnny reined sharply off to the right, galloped to a thick clump of trees and drew rein. And not a moment too soon. The rush of the FitzLee's was drumming hard toward the spot.

They passed close, dim shapes in the moonlight riding hard after the fast receding reports of Buck Sayles' revolver. When the last man was past, Johnny rode out of the cover and headed back toward the draw.

"Where you going?" Hank questioned.

"In to have a talk with Major FitzLee," Johnny said calmly.

HANK jerked around in the saddle. "Are you loco, Johnny?"

"Never have a better time than this, Hank. They branded Steve as crooked, an' I'll nail that lie in their teeth tonight. You'd better go after the rest of the boys."

"You're crazy an' I'm crazy for lettin' you," Hank declared. "We'll nail it together."

They rode down out of the trees at the mouth of the draw and headed for the bunk house and the big, sprawling adobe castle of the FitzLees on beyond. Built haphazardly through the years, the big house enclosed a huge open patio where flowers grew, water trickled into a rock-bottomed pool and a tall cottonwood towered to the sky.

And as they drew near the front of the building, a man stood forth in the moonlight, hailing them.

"Major FitzLee wants tuh know what happened?" he called. "Where's Dave Cole?" He carried a rifle in his hands.

A slender figure stepped to the balcony railing overhead. Moonlight shone on a white Spanish shawl, and Johnny knew who it was before Mollie FitzLee's clear voice carried through the crisp, still air.

"Who are they, Barker? Isn't that a wounded man across the saddle?"

Johnny rode toward them without answering, wondering how many more armed men were there in the shadows.

And then the angry voice of Major FitzLee issued from a dark doorway at the back of the balcony.

"Tell those men to speak out or stop where they are!"

Hank husked from the corner of his mouth: "I c'n stop that rifle first shot!"

"Wait," said Johnny. He raised his voice. "It's me—Johnny O'Day! I've come to see you, Major! Call off your gunmen, for I'm comin' in!"

Silence for an instant. Then Major FitzLee's voice, terrible, bitter. *"Shoot that man down, Barker.* Juan—Jennings—Morse—out in front with your guns!"

And Mollie FitzLee's cry: "Dad—you can't do that! It's murder!"

JOHNNY'S belt gun was in his hand before Mollie FitzLee spoke. The rifle on the terrace had snapped up toward him. A door banged open at the back of the terrace in the same instant. And Hank's rifle spoke at Johnny's side as the FitzLee man shot.

Johnny felt the hammering smash of the bullet against his left side, knocking him awry in the saddle, driving breath from his lungs.

He saw the FitzLee man stagger, drop his rifle clattering on the terrace flagstones; heard Hank's exclamation of satisfaction, then alarm.

"Drilled his shoulder clean! What's the matter, Johnny? He get you?"

"No!" Johnny retorted as he spurred his horse to the terrace, up, clattering, on the flagstones, riding down, putting to flight the wounded man.

Johnny breathed again. He threw the dizziness off with a terrific effort of will power and came down out of the saddle with a rush, groaning with the wave of pain through his side as he landed hard on his feet. He plunged to the back of the terrace, yelling at Hank, who was out of the saddle then, too.

"Bring Walker in!"

Under the balcony the shadows were black. Fire laced from them as his weaving rush hurled him into the shadows.

Johnny shot as he came; his bullet went home somewhere behind the flash. He followed the stumbling retreat of the man through the unlighted front door. He was so close that he bumped into the other when the man collided with a third man in the darkness.

A startled oath burst from the third man as Johnny found a head with his left hand and clubbed hard to it with the heavy revolver. He stepped aside quickly as the body went down; heard the third man, an arm's length away, cry: "Morse, are yuh plugged?"

Johnny reached the speaker in a step, jammed his six-gun savagely into the body. "Throw down your gun!" he ordered.

He had guessed about the gun—and he heard one strike the floor at his feet. He said:

"Turn around! Lead me to Major FitzLee!"

No threats were needed. The gun muzzle was enough. Johnny caught an arm with his free hand, shifted the gun as the other turned quickly and moved ahead of him to a door. And the door, opening, let light about them from the big, high ceilinged living room.

Square-hewn beams crossed overhead. A balcony ran across one end. Deer heads, mountain lion and bob cat skins were on the walls, and the massive furniture had been handmade by men on the FitzLee payroll.

A pock-faced Mexican with a gun in

his hand had just reached the bottom of a straight flight of steps. Halfway down the steps, Major FitzLee was hastening, with his right hand swathed in bandages and a gun in his left. And behind him was Mollie FitzLee. Johnny called over the shoulder of his prisoner:

"Hold that Mex before I kill him!"

Major FitzLee did not have to speak. The Mexican stopped, backed up a step, looking for cover or an avenue of escape.

And Major FitzLee ignored the order and descended the stairs deliberately, tall, erect, proud, and without fear. He reached the bottom and said:

"O'Day, you have broken into my house. I expected something like this. But now that you are here, I'm going to finish what I failed to do last night."

"Dad! Please!"

That was Mollie, pale, afraid. She caught her father's arm. He shook her hand off; and in that moment Hank Stevens spoke behind Johnny.

"Here's Walker, Johnny. And if that old coot gets reckless with his gun again, I'm goin' to kill him myself."

Mollie stepped in front of her father, her cheeks suddenly blazing. "Killing—shooting!" she cried passionately. "It's cost me my brother, brought unhappiness and sorrow! You men can't do any more of it! You can't!"

"Mollie, get out of the way," her father said calmly. "O'Day, what is that man Walker doing here?"

"I brought him," said Johnny. "Brought him from one of those log cabins beyond the bunk house where he was hid. He slipped the fifth ace in that game last night. I brought him here to tell you."

Major FitzLee stood very still. For the first time, uncertainty showed about him. "Walker, what about it?"

Dane Walker was haggard, shaking. "I dealt it, all right, I guess," he muttered. "Jack Diamond told me to."

"Then," said Major Jefferson FitzLee, in a voice suddenly hoarse, "Steve O'Day wasn't playing a crooked game?"

"No," said Walker.

Before Johnny's eyes Major Jefferson FitzLee seemed to wilt, to become less erect, to lose the proudness that had cloaked him through life.

"Then Darrel and Steve O'Day—and Cass O'Day—" He broke off, swallowing.

"All of them!" said Johnny bitterly. "Because the FitzLee's were too damn proud to listen to reason. My two brothers gone, our place burned out, the women run off in the night."

"I had no houses burned, O'Day."

"Two days ago I wouldn't have given you the lie on that," said Johnny. "But you were heard ordering Dave Cole out to the Crazy Horse. And I found your men there watching the fire. I shot 'em up. The wounded are in the cabin where I found Walker."

"Dad, you told me it didn't happen!" Mollie's voice was abruptly bitter, too.

BEFORE her father could answer, men ran into the hall. Johnny barely had time to step back as Dave Cole burst into the room with four men."

"We heard the shots," Cole exclaimed. "It's all right now, Major. O'Day's men have been run off. Our men are following them."

"Where were you, Cole?"

Dave Cole looked startled at the cold question. "Over beyond the bunk house," he replied after a moment's hesitation. "At the cabins in the draw."

"Who have you got in those cabins?"

"Several boys who got shot up chasing O'Day last night," Cole said unwillingly. "I put 'em there. Didn't want to bother you while you were laid up with that hand."

"Cole," said Major FitzLee ominously, "why did you burn out the O'Day place?"

"I didn't," said Dave Cole suddenly.

His glance went to Dane Walker. "This man has been drunk," he said. "He doesn't know what he's doing or saying."

"Leave him here!" Johnny snapped. "You wanted him out here bad enough to bring him in a wagon today after your boss had the sheriff lock me up."

"I had the sheriff lock no one up," Major FitzLee stated flatly.

"Then," said Johnny, "Cole used your name to get me out of the way while he got Walker out here. Walker was drugged after the card game last night. Jack Diamond and Cole here are working together."

"I see," said Major FitzLee. The muscles in his jaws were ridging. He was holding himself calm only with visible effort. "You—Jack Diamond," he said to Cole. "A crooked game is rigged between my son and Steve O'Day. I gave you orders to ride to the O'Day ranch and wait there for O'Day's arrival. You went—and burned them out, and kept it quiet. Today you give false orders to the sheriff in my name, and bring this gambler out here and hide him on my place. Presumably so he won't talk. I'm not a fool, Cole, although I've been blind and hasty. What were you up to?"

Dave Cole grinned.

"Nothing—now," he said. "I see you're going to fire me. I'll go laughing, Major. I never did like you, with your nose in the air all the time. Jack Diamond and I wanted the O'Day place. Never mind the swearing. I'll be laughing at you every time I hear a gun go off. You mighty near pulled our potatoes out of the fire. Think it over after I'm gone. I'm in the clear on all this." Then, turning to the Double Loop hands who had come in with him, he said, "So-long, boys." And he turned to follow them out.

"Wait, Cole!" The command stopped the foreman's departure. "I've thought it over," Major FitzLee said quietly. "You've cost me my son and driven me to kill an innocent man. You've stripped me of my pride and left me shamed and grieved. Stand still!"

"Don't do that!" Dave Cole shouted, stumbling back as he lifted his gun.

Mollie FitzLee screamed as the two men fired together, almost into each other's chests. Johnny reached her as she fainted.

And as he swung her up in his arms over the dead bodies of her father and Dave Cole, Hank Stevens' voice emerged from the reverberations of the shots. "Johnny, you was lucky the Major didn't cut loose at you with his left hand. Too bad he ain't alive to see how clean he drilled Cole!"

Johnny said as he turned toward the stairs, "Handle it, Hank, while I take care of Mollie. She's going to need us. You'd better send for my mother. She'll come."

And Johnny O'Day walked up the stairs with Mollie FitzLee in his arms; Mollie FitzLee, whose smile was like no other smile he had ever seen. Grief was still on his features as were the years which had come in a night; but his eyes were dreaming once more, seeing things beyond the present, and a new peace was smoothing out the hard bleak lines from his face.

THE END

In the Next Issue

RENEGADE LAW

A great novel of fighting courage, by

WALT COBURN

OUT SEPTEMBER 28th!

TENSLEEP SELLS HIS GUNS

By BART CASSIDY

(Author of "Tensleep Pays a Debt," etc.)

Tensleep Maxon, trying to jerk a stranger from a bog-hole, found he had looped a hell-roaring range war, with his rope tied hard and fast to his saddle-horn!

AS we duck into the timber I think I hear a shot, but skip it, figgerin' it's some Navajo Injun out huntin'. But when I come out on the river I hear a thin call driftin' downstream. An' a call for help is the same in any lingo an' at any distance. Forkin' my High Ball hawss, I ride spurs along a cattle trail, headin' for the sound. Roundin' a bend I bust outa the brush at the river bank. Out in the river, maybe thirty foot from the bank, is a feller swimmin' with his hat on. Only his head is stickin' out of the muddy flow.

"Roll me up for a cigareet!" he hollers. "When I yipped, I hoped mebby a Injun might hear me. But instead I raise me a cowboy. Feller, never was I so glad tuh see a hawss an' rope. If I ain't interferin', I kin do with some help."

"Say no more about it," I grin. "Yuh want I should swim out there an' warsh yore neck an' ears for yuh?"

"Swim, hell!" he gives back. "This

water ain't three foot deep. An' . . ."

"Yuh don't tell me," I josh back. "Then what yuh squattin' out there for? Stand up an' let me see yuh!"

"Jest what I'm doin'," he replies mournfully. "Standin' straight up tuh the full limit uh my manly height. An' wishin' I was six foot taller!"

"Yuh mean . . . ?" I ask, puzzled, an' stop as I notice that his chin which was clear of the water is now touchin' it. "Yuh mean . . . ?"

"Yeah," he chuckles, an' in his eyes is the shadow of a deadly fear. "I'm bogged tuh the eyes in quicksand."

"Quicksand!" I gasp. "Cripes!"

"So quick it'll bog a snipe," he says, cool. "Ten minutes more'll see me sucked down. Reckon you kin tail me up?"

"Dam right!" I promise. "Unless quicksand's stronger than catgut an' willin' hawssflesh. Raise up yore arms."

Which he does an' I slip my loop over them. When he gets it fixed around his his chest, I take my winds and put the hooks tuh High Ball. It's a pretty big tug but I get the feller drugged out, some stretched an' with his boots missin', but otherwise all right.

"You saved my life, *amigo,*" he says when we get our cigarettes goin'—"Which fer all its worthlessness is worth more tuh me than I got tuh pay yuh."

"Ferget it," I tell him. Then, curious, I ask, "If it ain't too touchy a question, howcome yuh tuh be afoot an' bogged?"

His face goes kinda bleak. *"Quien sabe?"* he says bitter. "A hawssthief come by this mornin' while I'm sleepin'. He takes my hawss, ties me up, an' then tosses me intuh the quicksand tuh sink at my ease. The . . ."

"He leave yuh there?"

"Slick as yuh please," the waddie answers. "But I'll know him if I see him again. My hunch is that he's one uh Velasco's Mex riders. He's dark like that, an' I think I seen him before. But I'll know him when next I run up against him."

"Who's this Velasco?" I asked, puzzled, havin' never heard of him before.

"Well," he shrugged his shoulders. "It's a story. Clouds is gatherin' hereabouts. She's a dry year, with winter feed an' summer water plaguing men's souls. So certain gents have set out tuh acquire six-gun title to them things. Gun pay's higher than a cat's back in fightin' time. An' me, I'm joinin' up on the other team. I didn't have no intention uh doin' so. But Velasco musta thought different an' set out tuh keep me away from the dotted line."

"I don't know as I blame yuh . . . now!" I say.

"An' you?" he asks. "You ridin' down tuh get in on the party?"

"Wrong," I assures him. "I'm on the drift. Runnin' from the shadders of a misspent life."

He laughs. "I kin judge men," he boasts, "an I peg you as a cool head an' a tough hand. Besides that . . . ." his forehead furrows, . . . "it seems I orta know you. Yo're familiar . . . ."

I don't know what gets into me, unless I figger he's my kind of a man. But I blurt out: "I'm Tensleep Maxon, uh Montana, Wyoming an' hard-tuh-foller trails."

He hollers, grabs for my hand, pumps it. "Maxon! Cripes! To think it'd be you that pulls me outa the drink. No wonder you look familiar. I've heard enough about you tuh almost know yuh . . . . by sight an' reputation. I'm Timberline Tim Ograin, which I've rode highline trails myself. Lissen . . . how's fer me an' you pardnerin' on this gunslingin' deal . . . .? We'll line up with the Mesa Land an' Cattle Company. A rich outfit in Blanco, ten mile up Thirsty River.

They're pointin' at Arturo Velasco, a Spanish feller that drawed the big Stirrup iron from his daddy, who got it from the King uh Spain in a grant. Best range in all this country—too good to belong to a Spick that got it from the King—who hires fellows to throw you in the river. . . ."

HE'S a persuasive cuss, Timberline Tim—hig-powers me, as the feller said. But more'n his gift uh gab, it's plain likin' him that gits me. Against my better judgement, actin' on his tip, I ride to a certain corral an' glaum a rigged bronc. Never mind how. Then me an' Timberline cross the river an' ride ten miles east to Blanco, where Timberline buys new boots an cleans his guns uh sand. Then we rattle to the office of the Mesa Land an' Cattle Company, Doug Jamison President.

Jamison, a cold eyed, short talkin' hombre, eyeballs us good when we come in, motions us into chairs.

"Set, boys," he says, sober. "What's yore pleasure?"

"My pleasure," hums Timberline Tim, "is tuh make some cash, spondulix, dinero an' mazuma. Money, savvy? Me an' my pardner, Notch Whittler, both. Earnin' same by toolin' a smoke wagon."

"Yeah?" Jamison lights a cigar, eyein' us narrow. "Tophand gunslingers, eh? What experience you had?"

"A lotta folks ask that," says Timberline. "But I ain't puttin' nothin' out. However, me an' Whittler is proud tuh demonstrate. Who yuh want killed? An' what yuh payin' fer murder?"

Jamison sets up, his eyes goin' wide. "Whoa," he says, startled. "Not so fast. Who mentioned killin's? The Mesa Company's hirin' cowboys that understand the smoke end of a gun, mainly because rustlers is active an' our enemies are showin' us disrespect. I think you'll do, first rate. The pay is seventy-five, found an' ca'tridges. Take it or leave it."

"When do we start?" asks Timberline.

"Right now," grins Jamison. "Notch Whittler, I think you said." An' he writes it down. "A good ol' Puritan name. What's yores?"

"Call me Timberline Tim Ograin. No hawg calls needed tuh draw me to the smoke."

Jamison scowls, scribbles a note, hands it to Tim. "All right, boys," he says, stiff. "Go over to the Tumbleweed Saloon. Hand this to 'Lija Cort. He's our foreman. He'll line yuh out right. That's all."

Me an' Timberline swap stares, turn an' walk out.

"What yuh think of it?" asks Timberline, as we walk to'rds the Tumbleweed Saloon. "How does the chore strike yuh?"

"Tell yuh better when I see 'Lija Cort an' hear him tell it."

"Don't fret, pardner," he says, stout. "No need tuh take nothin' offa him—with confidence in yore draw. The main thing is tuh sign on. If we like what Cort tells us, we'll do it. Otherwise . . . ."

Nervy! I'll tell a man. Short an' chunky, with a swagger like a banty rooster—a human fireball if I ever saw one. Timberline's a smoke wrangler who kin roll 'em red hot an' lightnin' swift without gettin' up a sweat, which is a shore hard sum tuh do. As we walk down the street, his quick bird-like glances tell me a lot. Years uh runnin' an' swimmin' rivers has left their mark on him. It's made him wary, bred savvy in his mind, made him cagey fer snake sign, an' fer what a man's vest might hide.

HIM an' me walk into the Tumbleweed, pause just inside to climate our eyes. A few town guards is lollin' about the place, playin' cards an' talkin'. They don't count. Five fellers drinkin' at the bar do. Timberline heads to'rds 'em. An' they

watch us come with drowsy eyes that don't fool me. Nothin' gits past them five. Grim lookin' men with slow-actin' manners but fast under their hats. Keen uh mind when sober, fast as hell with guns, but slow-movin' as a fat cub bear. Timberline plants himself wide-legged before them.

"Gents," he asks. "Which one uh you is 'Lija?"

"I am!" blats a dark, heavy-shouldered man, steppin' forth. "Cort to you. What yuh want?"

Timberline starts, settles, an' the red climbs up in his neck. "Tuh hell with manners," he growls. "I've got a better name fer yuh than either uh those—which I'll tell yuh if yo're interested."

'Lija Cort acts surprised. His mouth curls an' his black eyes reflect ugly thoughts millin' behind 'em. Cort's bad in any one uh seven Injun dialects.

"Feller," he snarls, "I don't know yuh, don't hone to. If ye're drunk, I kin damn soon sober yore skull with the barrel uh my Colt. Yo're mighty small to be talkin' so big. Mighty small."

"So's a sidewinder!" snaps Timberline.

"Edgy, eh?" cooes the big gun-foreman. "It ain't healthy here for onattached hawssbackers, neighbor, especially edgy ones. But if yo're doubtin' an' crave hot lead fer yore belly's sake, we'll take yore order."

"Slap 'em, yuh son of a sow!" yelps Timberline.

At least three of the five are drawin', with 'Lija Cort in the lead. But I'm wedged into a corner of the bar, my back to the wall. An' I'm first. "Hold yore smoke!" I holler, flashin' my .45, "or yore friends will be sendin' flowers! I'm fer peace, gents, even if I gotta fight fer it. Tim, yuh fool, haul in yore horns before yuh git 'em sawed. Cort, you ain't got no quarrel with us. We're all workin' fer Mesa . . ."

"Meanin' what?" barks the angry foreman, his gun half drawed.

"Meanin' Jamison hired us not five minutes ago. Said tuh report to you . . ." Tim hands him the note from Doug Jamison. Cort reads it, lets down.

"Well, why in hell didn't yuh say so. Ease off boys. Who are you two anyway?"

"Notch Whittler, same bein' me," I tell him, "an' my gun-pard, Tim Ograin."

"Hell," he snarls. "I kin read that. What else are yuh?"

"None uh yore business," I remind him.

"I don't care," he backs water," if yo're sons uh Colonel Colt hisself. You can't come in here an' ride me with sharp rawls. When a man works here, he keeps a civil tongue in his head or else . . . . Now lissen!" He loweres his voice an' motions his men around us. "Here's what to watch. Ol' Arturo Velasco is comin' tonight to play faro bank fer big stakes. A stall tuh draw attention away from the raid his men is due to stage at our Thirsty River holdin' grounds that he claims is his. I'm ready fer him out there an' if word comes that he's struck, I aim tuh take it outa his hide. Whittler, you an' Ograin hit for the Coronado Bar come dark. Hang around an' keep a eye on Velasco. If the deal breaks right, you'll earn yore hire before midnight. The rest uh you know yore places. . . ."

He tells it scary, makin' it look like Arturo Velasco is dangerous an' a plumb coyote. But it's too fishy fer me an' Timberline tuh swaller. It makes Timberline stiff as two bulldogs an' his face drawed an' white. An' he's still that away ten-fifteen minutes later when we leave 'Lija an' his gunies an' walk outside into the twilight.

"Son," I says, severe, when Timberline an' me is eatin', "let's me an' you swap some plain, straight-forward words.

When I agrees tuh pardner with you, I figgered you had savvy. Not a a quarrelsome, boastin' kid that can't control his temper. You shore pick a swell time to promote a gun shindy. . . ."

Timberline's buck teeth show like a wolf's. His face twists in somethin' meant fer a grin. But he's still white an' his eyes gleam like hot glass.

"Tensleep," he confesses, hoarse. "Timberline Tim Ograin is the feller I am. The feller I was got killed when his hawss pinwheeled with him several years ago. That's accordin' to official record. I was borned in the Robber's Roost. Only schoolin' ever I had was in hawss an' cow work, rustlin' an' trackin'. Gun wrangling come natural to me, likewise ridin'. I've did a heap uh things I ain't proud of. Likewise I've seen a heap uh nasty things did. But the nastiest, the dirtiest, the cruelest an' most brutal was did by that feller callin' hisself 'Lija Cort. He was one uh the Bunch till he went yeller an' sold 'em out, gettin' my dad an' several others killed. Cort don't know me 'cause I was a kid then an' I've changed. But some things don't change. My dad put in full time hatin' them that wronged him. I take after him thataway. Tensleep, I can't throw in my gun with that snake. Besides I'm beginin' to think it was him—not Velasco—who got me tossed in the drink."

"It looks like it, I tell him. "An', after what you told him, I doubt he expects it. He don't look like a forgivin' soul. So it's up tuh me an' you tuh sleep armored an' ready fer fast flittin' while in Blanco. Go on an' eat yore supper. Things has a way uh workin' out."

NOTHIN' more is said an' when we've finished an' gone outside it's gettin' dark. Up the street comes a fine buggy, drawed by two high-steppin' sorrels. Toolin' it, is a man with a black spade beard streaked with gray. Beside him, straight and trim, sets a girl wearing a lace dress as black as her high-piled hair. Behind them comes two riders on fine hawsses an' all bogged down with short guns an' ca'tridge belts. The rig pulls up to the hitchrack before the big store an' one of the riders lights to tie the team. The old man steps down, hands the girl out with a bow an' a flourish. From their dress an' manners, it's plain they're rich an' the pure quill. Two cowboys are goin' by an' I hear one say:

"There's Ol' Velasco an' his gal, Dulcie."

"Velasco?" I mutter to Timberline. "I thought Mexicans was dark. Them folks is white as you an' me—whiter even."

"They're Spanish," says Timberline, soft, his eyes on the girl. "Not no part of Mexican.—I've made a kinda mistake tuhday. . . ."

His voice is sorta awed an' I don't know as I blame him none. She's so good lookin' it plumb hurts—snappin' eyes that does things to yuh—hair black as a raven's wing—flashy as a paint pony an' built like a quarter hawss. *Chili con carne!* Whee-ew!

They pass us on the walk, the two cowpunchers follerin' on high heels with spur chains draggin!—I ketch the old Spaniard's eye an' he bows. I like what I see about him. He's tall, lean, gaunt in the middle. He walks straight, with a long, loose step. His eyes is brave an' bores holes through a feller. Not a mite uh snake blood in this Velasco an' here am I signed up tuh warm him an' his outfit up with gunsmoke. . . .

Timberline can't see Velasco. He meets the girl's eyes an' fer part of a minute they look at each other. Dulcie goes pink an' Timberline white. Then she's tore her eyes away an' is past us, with Timberline follerin' her every move with doglike eyes. Yeah . . . an' the gal lookin' back, just once.

"Dulcie!" I hear his murmur. "Dulcie! Tensleep, some day I'm gonna marry that gal."

"Someday," I echo, sarcastic, "you'll drink a gallon uh Injun likker an' really git sober. Then you'll wonder how a man kin be borned as drunk as you are right now. C'mon, le's git over to the Coronado Bar an' see this thing through."

He grunts, follers along, an' he'll never be no stiffer when he's dead. We enter the Coronado, a fancy place runnin' big to gamblin' layouts, an' start fiddlin' away nickle bets on the poker dice to kill time.

'Tain't long till Velasco an' one man comes in to buck faro bank. Shortly afterwards, Dough Jamison an' 'Lija Cort walk in an' sorta laze over their likker, their eyes busy. Noticin' me an' Timberline at the dice table, they act like strangers. An' Jamison is changed—his mouth is ugly an' there's two bulges under his coat. They talk whisperingly earnest, lookin' high up on the long side wall. There, near the ceilin', is little windmills, set in iron rings, fer blowin' out stale air an' cigar smoke. Their interest in one uh them fans sets me tuh wonderin' . . . .

Timberline applies hisself to the dice game, with all his born seriousness. But I'm more interested in the grim game bein' played without the houseman's knowledge—a game to be played with guns, with bullets for markers and death the take for the loser.

I'm rollin' the dice with Timberline beside me when I feel someone behind us. I feel a breath on my neck and a low voice in my ear.

"Hello, Kid!" it breathes. "How's Yellow Jacket?"

Timberline an' me whirl to face a feller solemn as a preacher at prayer, a feller with a moon face, bald head, star on his vest an' both hands in the pockets of his coat. His eyes is on Timberline but one pocket gun is pointin' straight at my belly. Which gives me time to reflect on what I've heard about the Yellow-Jacket Kid. Youngest an' last uh the Wild Bunch, he's proved slick an' slippery as a lard bucket fulla eels. An' he's wanted fer everything from disturbin' the peace to murder, includin' rustlin', road-agentin' and bank robbery. In other words, regardless uh fact, he's a fine hook fer masters uh skullduggary to hang their dirty drawers on. An', from his look, Timberline is the Yellow-Jacket Kid. His eyes flood with a old bitterness then fill with that daredevil somethin' that only death burns out.

"Hello, Baldy," he hums, brave. "What's that on yore chest?"

"That's the badge of authority around here, Kid. Why?"

"Oh. . . ." I see waves of antagonism pourin' through Tim, ". . . . it looks like a target."

"Target, eh?" Baldy snorts. "Anytime yuh hone fer target practice, son, jest slap yo' leather an' try out yo' luck. There ain't no surer death in any lingo. An' by the way, howcome that rumor that a salty bronc stirrup-drug you to coyote bait?"

"Howcome?" counters Timberline, "that a U. S. Marshal I've fooled many a time in the open, corners me with a haytown sheriff's badge on his bosom?"

The lawman laughs easy, shrugs. It's plain he's tickled his play has bore fruit, whether the kind he reached fer or not. I lay fingers on his arm.

"You arrestin' him?" I ask, timid.

"Yes!" he snaps. "What's it to yuh?"

"Not enough tuh git snuffy about," I confess. "I'm wonderin' about me. Am I nabbed too?"

He looks me over. "No-o-o, I reckon not. Who are yuh?"

"Me? I'm Notch Whittler, a bronc-snapper an' a good 'un. Killin' time with this feller till the murder comes off."

"Murder?" he asks. "What murder?"

"Humph," I snorted. "Where the hell you bin? An' you a U. S. Marshal, eh? Most ever'body here knows Arturo Velasco's due tuh git his ticket punched . . ."

"By who?"

"Why . . . 'Lija Cort an' his Mesa gunriders."

"The hell!" he acts like I'm hoorawin' him. "That's a serious charge, feller. I'll put Yellow Jacket in jail an' go into it with yuh."

"Lissen, Marshal," I protest. "Is Yellow Jacket so bad yuh can't trust his word?"

"What yuh mean?"

"When this thing breaks, it's me an' you an' Yellow Jacket ag'in' the pack. Not a man in this town will buck the Mesa Company tuh save that fine ol' man playin' yonder. I know how Yellow Jacket feels about 'Lija Cort. Kid, will yuh give the marshal yore word not to escape or tuh gun him if he gives you a hand in this game?"

"I swear tuh God I won't," grits the Kid. "But fer you, I'd be six foot under quicksand. I don't reckon jail . . . or the rope kin be worse. An' besides, it's worth either uh them things to git a crack at Cort. . . ."

"Well . . . I don't know," puzzles the lawman. "If I done it an' . . ."

"Lissen," I tells him. "You two auger it out while I sashay around a bit. I'll see yuh right here some soon."

"What's yore interest in Velasco?" asks Baldy Thayer.

"I ain't half as interested in him," I confess, "as in his black-eyed gal."

"You too, eh?" half-snarls the Kid.

The marshal looks from one of us to the other, his eyes twinklin'. "So-o-o? I mighta knowed. The's allus a woman mixed up in this crime business . . . somewheres. Well, Kid?"

HE turns to Yellow Jacket an' I stroll to the bar an' order beer. The Coronado is fillin' up. The games are gettin' lively. A half-dressed Mex gal with castanets is kickin' up jeweled heels among the tables. But fer all the show, I ketch the quizzical eyes uh 'Lija Cort an' Doug Jamison on me. They're lookin' as if I'm some puzzlin' to 'em. But I'm interested personal in them air fans, convinced they play a part in this ugly business. I figger they rate a look from the outside.

Twistin' a smoke, I light it, stroll out front. Buildin's are solid fer several hundred feet. Then I find a aisle an' go back. Kickin' around in the dark, over rubbish an' dirt piles, old lumber an' tin cans, I come at last to the long Coronada buildin'. Lights's glimmer through the whirlin' fans. An', shore enough, I find a ladder laid ag'in the wall under the first one, placed right over the blind end of the bar.

Heavy thinkin' don't make it add to nothin' but a good gun rest fer a bushwhacker an' I promise myself to watch it close. Startin' back, I decide to make the circle. Right behind the saloon is a smaller buildin'. Sort of a shed. With just a few steps between the doors. A light glitters from under the door of the shed an' I hear voices. Doug Jamison is talkin', protestin' . . .

"The sign ain't right, I tell yuh, 'Lija. . . ."

"Who says it ain't?" barks 'Lija Cort. "An' why the hell ain't it?"

"I told yuh why. It's them two fellers I was fool enough tuh hire—Whittler an' Ograin, which uh course ain't their names."

"Whada we care what their names is? One you called Tensleep Maxon, a hawssthief. I ain't never heard uh him. Nor I ain't never seen the hawssthief I was scairt of."

"I don't like the way they're actin', 'Lija. They've got me worried."

"Yuh orta be glad," chuckles Cort.

"Don't yuh see where they fit into this picture? Say, that's a pip—made tuh order. I've sent Slim an' Ace out tuh round Maxon up. What I'll tell him will send him skyhootin' outa here. An' what a posse will find in his saddle pocket will hang him higher'n Hamon. Made tuh order, I tell yuh."

"How about his partner? I don't like the way he's chinnin' Sheriff Thayer."

"Lissen!" 'Lija's voice is a snarl. "That little sand-blistered son thinks I don't know him. I thought he was dead. Heard he was headin' this way an' had him tossed tuh the quicksand. Somebody musta pulled him out. He's the Yellow-Jacket Kid. His dad rodded the Roosters till I slipped him his ticket. An' I'll take care uh this un too, don't worry. First, we gotta git Thayer outa there somehow. Then, sharp at eleven, when the lights go out, you throw the lead to Velasco, then hop over the bar to the safe. I'll tally the Kid an' be under the ventilator tuh hook what yuh hand me on Slim's rope. An' take clean guns fer me an' you through the hole. Time the place is lighted, me an' you is in the clear an' . . ."

Hoofbeats makes me crouch alongside a barrel uh bottles. A feller ties a hawss at the saloon corner, meets another gunie in the alley an' together they walk into the Coronado.

"Where's he at?" I hear 'Lija ask.

"*Quien sabe?*" one of 'em answers. "No sign of him. Waited fer him to come to his hawss an' when he didn't show, I fetched it here an' tied it, like yuh told me. . ."

NOT waitin' tuh hear more I just slide out of there, speak soft to High Ball as I pass an' enter the saloon by the front door. Things is much as I left 'em except 'Lija Cort an' Jamison are gone. The clock on the back-bar says ten-fifteen. Timberline an' the marshal is throwin' poker dice, like pards instead uh lawman an' prisoner. When they see me comin', Baldy Thayer speaks tuh Timberline an' they quit the dice fer a seat along the wall. I join 'em there.

"Well," asks the lawman, close-lipped, "how about the murder?"

"Murders," I grin. "Lights out at eleven. Then death touches Velasco an' the Kid here at the same time. . ."

"Me?" Yellow Jacket wrinkles his nose. "How come?"

"'Lija knew yuh. . . he admitted tuh havin' yuh tossed in the creek. He's still after yuh."

"What then?" asks Thayer, interested.

"Then a safe behind the bar yonder is robbed. An' me, havin' bin warned tuh dust, am supposed tuh run fer my hawss an' be caught with evidence on my saddle. A fall guy fer two killin's an' a clean-up. Nice little playmates, eh?"

The lawman nods, grim. "I'm kinda dumpy an' bald an' harmless lookin'," he muses, an' folks sometimes sizes me up wrong, but . . . say, who all's in on this party? Who's in on it?"

"'Lija Cort dealin'," I tell him, "an' Doug Jamison takin' chips without enthusiasm. Me an' the Kid here callin' fer cards. Aturo Velasco an' the owner uh this saloon settin' in on the old whipsaw without knowin' it."

"Make room fer another gamblin' man," smiles Baldy Thayer, grin. "Looks like seven-hand poker tuh me."

"If they don't deal you out, Marshal," I suggest.

He looks at me narrow, but says nothin'. We set there awhile, Timberline sullen, dangerous, Baldy watchin' ever' move, me lollin' sleepy-like, follerin' the hands of the clock.

It's a quarter to eleven when 'Lija Cort an' Doug Jamison walk in, glance at the three of us an' as quickly glance away.

As they walk to the bar, a rattle uh shots sounds down street. A minute later a feller dashes into the Coronado, looks round wild an' spots Baldy Thayer.

"Quick, Marshal! he blats. "Feller held up the Tumbleweed Saloon. The boys has him corralled in the rocks an' don't know how tuh handle him. C'mon!"

"She's a plant, Marsh," I warn him.

"Yo're tellin' me," he gives back, with a nasty chuckle. "I called fer cards, didn't I? Deal me a hand."

He jumps up, shifts his gunbelt, tries the pull of his .45 an' heads fer the door. With ten-twelve curious jiggers follerin'. An' I'm wonderin' if mebby it ain't to git them outa the way that Baldy appears so easy. Things is gettin' close. . . an' tight.

"Lissen, Kid," I tell Timberline. "Slide over beside Velasco. When the lights go out, jerk him down an' plug low an' a little to the right of the gunflame pourin' at him. I'll quiet the gun targetin' you. . ."

"Boy," he says, fervent, "you shore are a gambler. I prefer gunnin' in the light. . . where a skunk's stripes show. Cards is dealt. It's my bet an' I'm checkin' it to yuh."

Before I find out what's on his mind, he strides away from me. It's two minutes of eleven when Timberline steps in beside Arturo Velasco, who's buckin' the tiger as if his life depends upon it.

"Excuse me, Mister Velasco."

The Spaniard turns, nettled, questioning. "Yes? W'at ees eet, my frien'?"

My eyes go to Cort an' Jamison at the bar. They look at each other, sorta baffled, then again at Timberline.

"Yore daughter, Mister Velasco," says Timberline. "She—"

Velasco turns gray. "Dulcie?"

"I think she's mebbyso in trouble. Those shots—"

"*Dios!*" groans the Spaniard. "Queek! Take me to her, my frien'."

He leads the way to the door, his cowboy bodyguard an' Timberline matching his stride. The Kid grinnin', his hand on his gun, his eyes on 'Lija Cort. Me, I'm also watchin' Cort an' Jamison as I slide after Timberline, quite shore now the Kid's plan is better'n mine, havin' more surprise in it. An' surprise shore has 'em guessin'. . . an' paraylzed. Velasco an' Timberline are most to the door an' I'm within' a rod of it when a gun fires smashing out the lights. 'Lija Cort comes to life.

"Git 'em!" he bellers, hoarse.

"You'll never see it!" the Kid bellers back, an' his gun slashes the blackness.

FROM the bar comes a ghastly, croakin' sob, then the clump of a fallin' body. I slam a shot at where Jamison was standin', but hear his boots land on the other side of the bar, then the bang of a door as he goes out. My eyes go to the first ventilator as someone removes the fan. Starlight shows, then a head darkens it. I put a slug through it an' the head disappears.

Now I rush fer the door. Guns are bangin' in the street as the Mesa Company gunmen answer the call of 'Lija Cort. They're movin' in from three sides, Timberline, Velasco an' a third party givin' it back at them. That third party is Marshal Baldy Thayer an' he's talkin' calm an' cool, orderin' Timberline an' the Spaniard between buildin's. Which a retreat ain't out of order, as the feller said, considerin' the sleet uh lead the Mesa gunmen are rainin' at 'em.

Bein' kinda outa the fight in the darkness, I slide along the buildin' fronts, figgerin' to git behind them hellions. But somethin' else takes my mind off that idea. A feller comes bustin' out between buildin's runnin'. I can't see who it is, but can hear his boots plain. On the hunch that it's Doug Jamison, crooked

Superintendent of the Mesa Company, I take after him.

Ahead uh me is a flash uh flame, a yell of a dyin' man an' a scream, shrill, terrifyin'—a girl's scream. Uncertain as tuh what's happenin', I hesitate. A door opens ahead uh me an' light splashes onto the board walk. In the doorway stands Jamison, gun in hand. Held in the crook of his powerful arm is Dulcie Velasco.

"Jamison!" I holler. "Step away from that gal, yuh yellow son of a she-coyote. Play a man's part if it's in your striped hide, an' we'll smoke it out."

He laughs, slaps a shot at me, then steps inside, slams the door. That shot passes so close I can smell the burnin' hair of the Devil's brandin' pen.

Forgin' ahead, I stumble over a body. It's the Velasco cowboy who was with Dulcie. I take his gun, crawl near to the house where Jamison an' the girl are holed up. The light is out now an' inside it's pitch black. Slidin' close to the adobe wall, I slash out a window pane with the barrel of a gun. Shots pour out.

"Dulcie!" I call.

"Yes!" I hear her scairt voice.

"I'm throwin' you a loaded gun. If you kin git hold of it, pour the lead to that polecat."

I toss in the extra gun an' hear Jamison loose her to hunt fer it, just as I figgered. Then I dive in through the window, roll once an' come up against a table. As it moves, Jamison lands on me like a ton uh bricks. I grab his gun-arm, strivin' all the time to git my gun in his ribs. But he's cagey, rolls away from it, me with him. As we hit the wall, he knows it's up with him an' hollers like a hound. The muffled crash uh my gun silences him an' I git up, kinda shaky.

"Dulcie," I call again, "can you ride a horse?"

"Any horse," she says, proud.

"C'mon then," I tell her. "Yo're ridin' mine."

"I can't leave my father."

"You can't help him here," I auger. "But you can by ridin' fer yore men. I'll throw in with him here an' we'll stand 'em off till you git help."

"That's wisest," she admits, and we ease out, slink between buildings. Gunfire swells in the alley behind, but there's nobody between us an' the corner of the Coronado where High Ball is tied. He's boogery with the smell of blood from the dead man slumped at the foot of the ladder an' it takes time to quiet him so Dulcie can mount.

"My father?" she asks, hesitatin' . . .

"I'll look after him, ma'am."

"And . . . and your friend?"

"Too tough to kill, ma'am."

SHE touches my hand, roars away. Carryin' my prayer that High Ball will run hisself off at the legs. The fight is swingin' my way as Baldy leads a dodgin' retreat. Even as I throw in my gun, I see the Velasco cowpuncher reel, stagger an' fall down. Velasco claps his hand to his shoulder an' wobbles a bit. Seems like most of the townsmen have throwed in with the Mesa fighters. Baldy Thayer leaps to Old Man Velasco's aid, hollerin'.

"We gotta git tuh cover, boys. Yellow Jacket, where's that loud-talkin' but dang scarce pardner uh yore'n?"

"Right here," I holler back from the door of the shack behind the Coronado. "Holdin' open the door tuh cover. An' rearin' to do my talkin' now with lead."

They come a-runnin', pop inside. I slam the door behind 'em, bar it. In a jiffy, we're surrounded an' lead is slashin' out glass. An' the four of us are each holdin' down a window. Me an' Timberline, Velasco an' lead-squirtin' Baldy Thayer. Velasco is shot high in the upper

arm, a simple but dang painful wound.

"Dios," he moans once in a lull. "Eet ees not the hurt of the arm, señores. But the hurt of the heart. My little Dulcita. . . . "

" . . . is gone on my hawss tuh fetch help," I tell him, "an' we kin look fer them as soon as fast hawsses kin make it."

"Gracias a Dios!" he murmurs. An' even the hard-bitted Yellow-Jacket Kid mutters, "Amen!"

It's a bushwhackin' proposition fer two-three hours. Then the Mesa gang stages a rush. The four of us set there, guns gushin' over the sills, till there ain't a half dozen shells among us. If them outside knowed how close they was to a kilin', they'd finish it. But they draw off, leavin' several pards huddled on the ground. Then there's a silence in our hot, smoky fort—heavy breathin' an' the hoarse croak of the Yellow-Jacket Kid:

"How soon," he drawls, half to himself, "before. . . ?"

"Not tonight, Timberline," I tell him. "Leaders kin fire their men tuh take one lickin' like that. Then they chill. It'd take time, cussin' an' hard likker tuh drive 'em back fer more uh the same. An' they ain't got no leaders."

"Jamison?" suggests Timberline.

"Is dead," I finish. "I killed him."

"Good fer you, feller," enthuses that little gunslingin' hell-in-pants. "Yuh hear that, Marshal?"

No answer from Baldy's window. I crawl over to him, thumb a brief match, blow it out. One look is enough. Baldy Thayer had met that attack lookin' over his sights. An' had never moved. Now he's settled into a more comfortable position. With a mark on his forehead—a blue-edged hole that has let an ounce uh lead through. An ounce too much an' he has give up his chore of takin' Timberline in. It hurts in a way—hurts to see a brave man go out. But the one blessin' in it is that the Kid is free now, has a chance to live down his early mistakes.

In an hour Dulcie is back with the hard ridin' Stirrup cowpunchers, rearin' for a fight. But the Mesa gunmen have skipped, folded up an' quit. The town coyotes has slunk to their holes. As we come out of fort, Dulcie leaps into her dad's arms, tellin' him in Spanish what I'd did fer her. He lays a friendly hand on my shoulder an' Timberline's.

"My good *amigos,*" his voice is trembl'in', "you have done much for me—a stranger—and for my house. How can I reward you? What can I do to . . . ?"

"I'm the best damn cowpuncher ever was born," boasts the Kid, suggestively.

'An' me," I grin, with a wink at the girl who can't hardly keep her eyes off the salty little codger, "I'm that long-looked-fer hawsspeeler that's never been throwed."

"My frien's," Velasco winces at a pain in his arm. "Conseeder eet done. You shall both be part of the *rancho* you have saved."

An' that's howcome me an' Timberline to ride out to the old Stirrup Ranch, on Cottonwood Fork. Timberline in time to make good on his boast to marry the dark-eyed daughter of the house. An' me . . . well, me to break a bronc or two an' stage another ruckus with Ol' Man Trouble.

Tensleep Maxon rides again, in the
October 15th issue
Out September 28th!

By WALT COBURN
(Author of "Death Rides Herd," etc.)

BLACK

BLACK JACK JACKSON had gathered his scattered gang and was again on the prowl along the Mexican Border. Proof of the fact sounded in the rattle of gunfire there at the old adobe corral just south of the line. In the red glow of sunset Black Jack and his renegade rustlers were paying off an old graudge. Paying it off with carbine and six-shooter.

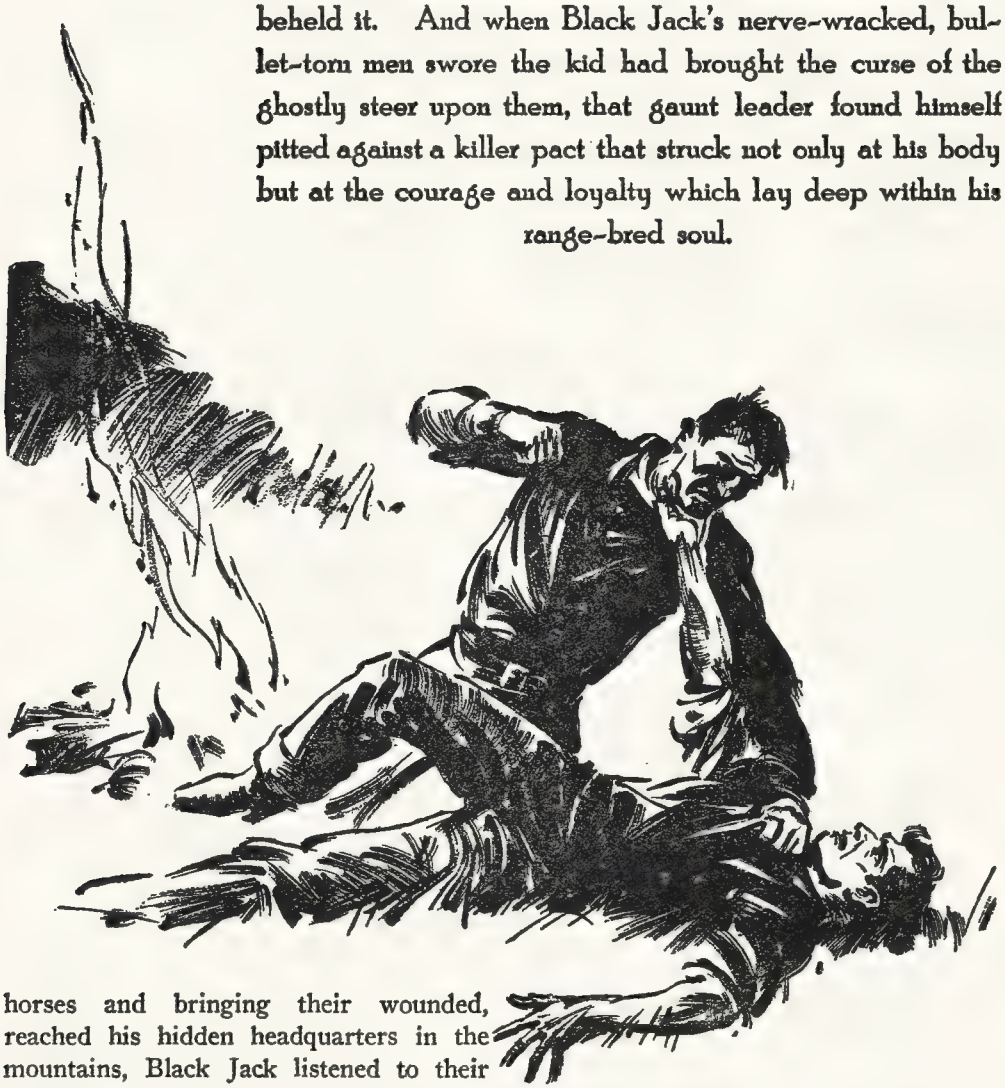
Nearly a year ago the Palomas gang, composed of tough Mexicans and tougher white men, had raided a herd of cattle that Black Jack was bringing out of Mexico. Black Jack's men, out-numbered, had Shot him again. The tall Texas slid sideremuda slaughtered and run off. Black Jack had not been with them.

When his men, mounted on played out

OUTLAW

NOVELETTE OF BORDER RENEGADES

The freckled range-waif saw it first—that huge black *Murder* steer, omen of evil and sudden death for all who beheld it. And when Black Jack's nerve-wracked, bullet-torn men swore the kid had brought the curse of the ghostly steer upon them, that gaunt leader found himself pitted against a killer pact that struck not only at his body but at the courage and loyalty which lay deep within his range-bred soul.



horses and bringing their wounded, reached his hidden headquarters in the mountains, Black Jack listened to their bad tidings with little show of emotion. He was not the blustering sort, this big, black-haired rustler.

"For every steer they stole," he said, "we'll get back ten. We'll wipe out the Palomas gang for keeps. But we won't get 'em till they have a big herd gathered."

Black Jack wondered how the Palomas gang had learned about that herd of cattle and the short-handed crew that herded them toward the Border. This half-breed Mexican known as Palomas seldom worked in this part of the country. Plainly that raid had been an act of hate rather than one of greed. Black Jack had once taken a knife from Palomas,

thrashed him in a Juarez cantina, then had ear-marked him with the knife and kicked him out of the place. And Palomas was not of the breed that forgets or forgives.

But how had he learned about that herd? How, unless there was a traitor in Black Jack's gang? He said as much to Wade Withers, the cowboy who had been in charge of the herd.

"Somebody tipped our hand, Withers. Got any idea who it was? Any kind of hunch?"

Wade Withers was tall, with thick shoulders and a bull neck. He had square, hard features, yellow eyes flecked with black, and thick, tawny hair that he wore a trifle long. He was right bower to the black-haired, gray-eyed Black Jack.

"Can't prove anything, Jack, but I got a notion," He had grinned faintly.

A few evenings later as they sat around the campfire after supper, Wade Withers looked across at a tall young Texan who recently joined the outfit.

"We don't like traitors in this outfit, mister," Withers had said flatly. "I got a notion to send you back to the Palomas gang where you come from. I got another notion, though, that beats that 'un all to hell—fill your hand!"

The Texan was a little slow. He was cocking his gun when Withers shot him. The tall Texan slid sideways, almost into the fire. There was a black hole between his eyes, another under his breast bone. There was a queer, twisted smile on his dead face.

"You shouldn't have done that," said Black Jack, who hated wanton killing. "What proof have you got that the feller was a snake?"

Wade Withers ejected two empty shells from his gun and re-loaded it. His flecked yellow eyes look red in the reflection of the firelight. Withers was a natural killer.

"Go look in his war-sack and you'll find proof. Letters from a Mexican girl named La Paloma. Do you know who La Paloma is? Ever meet her?"

"I don't fool around with Mexican señoritas. They're too damned dangerous. But there was a dancer in Juarez at the cantina that they called La Paloma. She had hair that was as much red as it was black. She could dance. What's she got to do with it?"

"Just this. She gets this Texas gent stuck on her. Has him roped and hog-tied. She's Palomas' sister, that's all. And he sends his messages through her. You'll find 'em in the snake's war-sack."

"Just the same, Withers, no more killin' like this one. I don't like murder."

He had his chance to draw."

"A hell of a chance, Withers, and you know it. Boys, dig a grave and we'll plant the Texas gent." Black Jack had walked away from the fire. He found the perfumed letters. They all began with the same words, "My dearest lover." They contained many terms of endearment, as well as carefully worded messages concerning the handling of wet cattle. The notes were signed La Paloma.

Black Jack put the letters in his chaps pocket and went out alone. He liked to be alone when he wanted to think.

NOW, after a year, he was striking back at Palomas. Fighting there in the red Mexican sunset at the old adobe corral. Palomas and his men were inside the high corral that was like a stockade. Black Jack and his bunch squatted behind patches of brush and boulders. The scattered cattle could be picked up in the morning. This evening's job was aimed to wipe out Palomas and his renegade pack.

"Pass the word to the boys," he told Withers, "that we'll charge just as the sun

sets. Every man for himself. Palomas is my meat, personal,"

"If we charge, we're plain targets, Jack. That's a hell of a wide open strip to cross."

"You don't have to cross it if you don't want to. Pass the word around that when the last bit of sun goes behind that peak, we charge." More than once Black Jack had doubted the actual courage of Wade Withers. There had been times, times similar to this, when Withers had been a little reluctant to take a fighting chance out in the open. On the other hand Withers bore the reputation of being one of the most deadly killers on either side of the Border, and that is giving a man a tough reputation. That's why Black Jack had picked him to be second in charge.

For two years now they had ridden together, and fought shoulder-to-shoulder, running wet cattle out of Mexico. Black Jack needed a man like Withers, even if the yellow-eyed renegade was a wanton killer. It took a man like Withers to put fear into the hearts of the renegade pack Black Jack had gathered, and it was that cold-blooded side of Wade Withers that they all feared. Most of the men hated him, but they took his orders and obeyed them. Fear was their only bond between them and Wade Withers. Loyalty and love for the leader himself bound them to the slow-talking, square-shooting Black Jack Jackson.

A few minutes, and the last bit of that ball of red would sink behind the ragged line of purple hills. A few minutes more and the life of every man would be at stake. They would be running, shooting targets as they spurred their horses across the open space between their shelter and the adobe corral. For this was to be a mounted charge once they quit the rush and boulders. Then there would be dead horses and dead men. There would be minutes of roaring hell as they swung their horses against the wall, quit their saddles and swung over the stockade into a hand-to-hand fight.

To Black Jack that was part of the futile game they played against death. Death, with its marked deck, its loaded dice, was bound to win in the end, some day, some night; it was all in the game in which Fate had staked them to chips. Perhaps Withers was right, Black Jack half admitted as he jerked the saddle cinch tight on his big black gelding. Perhaps Withers with his caution was the better general. But Black Jack believed in bold tactics.

He saw Wade Withers cinching up his buskskin horse. The horse was the same color as the yellow-eyed outlaw's hair and eyes.

Black Jack watched the sun. Now the last red speck was gone. He was in the saddle, his big black spurred to a run. His wild cowboy yell sounded above the gunfire. He looked to either side, grinned as he saw his men charging the corral. He saw Withers, lying low along the neck of his dun horse, a six-shooter in each hand, his teeth bared in a queer grin. His face looked oddly white.

A HORSE piled up, throwing its rider who came on afoot, guns ready. Another toppled from his saddle and lay in a heap. Another man shot from his saddle was being dragged, his foot caught in the stirrup.

No time now to look around. At the wall and over it! Black Jack was the first man over. The others were piling over now, dropping inside, fighting hand-to-hand, half-blinded by the corral dust that was kicked up as they battled. The saddled horses inside the corral lunged, pawing, striking, trying to escape that cracking gunfire and a mad confusion they could not comprehend. Men shot wildly, or clubbed with the barrels of

empty guns. Wade Withers fought like a man gone mad with hate.

There was the scream of a wounded horse, and groans and curses blotted out the prayers of dying men being trampled in the dust. The same reddened dust blinded Black Jack Jackson as he fought his way through the milling crowd, his blood-shot gray eyes searching for Palomas.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, that furious fight was over. Dust settled, red blood was blotted up by the yellow dust in the afterglow of the crimson sunset.

Black Jack searched among the dead and wounded. There was a queer expression on his deeply tanned dust-powdered face. He was hunting for Palomas, but the half-breed was not among those who lay there in the dust. Black Jack's men had done their bloody work well, and no man of the enemy faction was alive. But that was not what caused the odd look in the gray eyes of Black Jack Jackson. He turned to Wade Withers who stood near by, blood-smeared, grimy, hatless.

"Withers," he said tonelessly, measuring his words, "we've made a mistake. These men don't belong to the Palomas gang. Whoever told you so tricked us. Who was it brought you that news?"

Withers pointed to one of the dead men who had belonged to the Black Jack gang.

"That's the gent."

"Something damn queer about it all. I know one or two of these dead fellers. They ain't so much better than Palomas' bunch except we never had a run-in with 'em. Most of 'em are wanted over the line. I used to work with some of 'em. Have the boys get those horses out of the corral. Then we'll take care of the plantin' . . . . Well, I'll be damned!"

He strode across the corral to the chute that had been blocked up and barricaded. There, huddled in a sheltered place was a small boy about twelve years old. He was powdered with yellow dust, but even so it was plain that his hair was red and that he was freckled. In his two hands he held a long-barreled six shooter and it was pointed at Black Jack.

"Stay away from me, you damned big son!" he called out in a choked voice.

Black Jack grinned and took a step forward. The big gun roared, the recoil jerking it from the boy's hand. Black Jack, still grinning, looked down at the flesh wound in his arm.

WITHERS came up, his gun in his hand. I'll knock the brains out of the damned brat."

"Put up that gun, Withers," said Black Jack, "and take care of them horses. Leave this young 'un alone. Git busy."

Black Jack walked slowly up to the small boy who crouched there, his gray eyes blurred with tears, his fists doubled.

"I ain't a-scared, you big son!"

"I'll tell a man you ain't, button. You're a wildcat on wheels. Nobody is goin' to hurt you any, old feller."

"But I shot yuh. There's the blood."

"That don't matter, feller. I bin shot before. Now supposin' you tell a man just what you're doin' here?"

"I come with—with them cowboys. They picked me up and fetched me along with 'em. I'd got lost. Some rustlers killed my dad and mother and I got away. I started out afoot. I was awful dry and wore out, and I laid down and went to sleep. Them cowboys run onto me. They was good to me; awful good. Now you killed 'em off just like them Palomas rustlers killed off my dad and mother. I bet you're some of the Palomas gang, damn you." His gray eyes were black with fury.

"Nope, button, we ain't none of the Palomas gang. What's your name?"

"Billy Cline. Dave Cline's kid."

"From down on San Marcos Crick?"

The boy nodded. Grief was still fresh in his boy's heart and he bit his under lip to keep back a sob. Black Jack put a big hand across the boy's shoulder.

"Go ahead and cry, old feller. You've bin through enough to make a growed up man feel funny inside. I'm takin' care of you from here on. I ain't half as bad as you got me figured. Now you and me will go on to camp and talk things over."

Black Jack lifted the small boy down from his perch and they left the corral. The boy rode behind the saddle and they went to camp. A giant Negro cook rolled his eyes in wonder.

"Lawd, Black Jack, where you-all pick up 'at stray?"

"Over at the 'dobe corrals, Sam. Directly he's washed up some, do what you can to take the wrinkles out of his belly. He looks like he ain't had a square meal in a year."

"Whut's his name?"

"Bein' as how I found him at the Adobe Corral, I reckon we'll just naturally have to call him 'Dobe. Dobe slip on down to the crick and wash up some. Then Sam will wrap you around some real grub. You're the horse wrangler from now on. I'll be back directly. Don't run off, will yuh?"

"I ain't runnin' off, mister."

"And don't tell anybody what your name is or how you got to the corral. That's our secret, old feller. Remember your name is Dobe. You never had any other."

Black Jack shook hands solemly with the small boy, then mounted and rode into the dusk.

He found some of the cowboys gathering the scattered cattle. Wade Withers had taken some of them out, hoping to gather what they could. Black Jack rode up to them.

"We ain't gatherin' these cattle by dark or any other time. We made a bad mistake there at the 'dobe corral. Killed off some men that was friends of mine. That was bad enough, takin' their cattle would be worse. Turn 'em loose and come to camp."

Back at camp Black Jack had supper, then he and Dobe took a short walk along the creek. He did his best to cheer the boy up. After a fashion he succeeded.

"Say, mister, did you ever hear of a big black steer branded *murder* on his left ribs? Well that steer was in the herd last night. I seen him myself when they let me go along on first guard."

CHAPTER TWO

Longhorn Hoodoo

THE Murder steer! That big, longhorn that traveled alone along the cattle trails—a black, red-eyed omen of evil. For wherever that huge black steer appeared, death followed in his wake. Like some phantom thing that roamed a lonely, mysterious trail. An enormous black beast with the widest spread of horns that had ever been seen on a steer, sharp as twin knife points.

No cowboy had ever sawed those horns. Subject of countless yarns of death, this steer that wore a scabbed murder brand. He had been sighted in every state along the cattle trail that led from Mexico to Canada. Cowboys listened in silence when some new tale was told about this black steer, and while there were some who scoffed at the idea that his appearance was a warning of death, yet in their hearts they held a secret fear of his appearance.

"You plumb sure you sighted that murder steer, Dobe?"

"Yes, sir. Plain as day. It was bright moonlight and he stood there, off to himself. Two of the cowboys sighted him

when I did. They talked some about it and how it meant bad luck. The steer stood there for a while, then he trotted off, tossin' his horns. Gee, he was big, bigger'n any two steers put together. He looked spooky. Did you ever see him, mister?"

Black Jack nodded. "Once."

"And was anybody killed?"

"He'd have been killed anyhow, Dobe, regardless," Black Jack said casually.

The man and boy sat on the creek bank in silence. Black Jack was thinking back, remembering the moonlight night when he had seen that Murder steer. Oddly enough it had been Dave Cline, Dobe's father, who had been on guard with him that distant night when they had both seen the steer. That was before Dave Cline got into the shooting scrape that sent him into Mexico. That shooting scrap happened the morning after Dave Cline and Black Jack had sighted the Murder steer. . .

And it struck Black Jack odd that the boy Dobe should have seen that steer last night, only a scant twenty-four hours before that deadly fight at the adobe corral. It made him feel spooky even though the big cowpuncher was not inclined to be superstitious.

The man and boy walked back to camp. A Mexican was playing his guitar and singing. Some of the others sat around, smoking or wrapping bandages about wounds. There was no sign of the tawny-haired Wade Withers, but that was not strange. Withers would often saddle up and ride away from camp, to be gone an hour or perhaps all night. The Mexicans claimed that he had eyes like a puma and could see in the dark. They feared him after dark. A few white men shared the belief, but never openly voiced it.

There was a feeling of restlessness in camp. That battle at the adobe corral had been enough to rub raw the nerves of any man.

Black Jack gave Dobe some blankets and told him where to sleep. Then he sat by the firelight smoking, staring into the fire. He was trying to figure out just how he had been tricked into making that blunder there at the adobe corral. It had been Withers' job to keep the Palomas gang located through spies. He had taken the yellow-eyed killer's word for it that they had located Palomas and his gang at the corral. Who had slipped up on the job? Or who was the traitor who had given false information?

There was a hard, brooding glint in the black-haired outlaw's eyes. His dark face, reflecting the glow of the fire, looked stern and a little cruel. He knew his men were covertly watching him. They were uneasy, not knowing what he was thinking. He rolled a cigarette and lit it, then got to his feet.

"Better roll in the blankets, boys. We're pulling out in the morning before daylight. Get the remuda in early, you last men on guard to-night. Somewhere not too far away Palomas and his gang are moving a big herd of cattle north. We're goin' after 'em!"

LONG hours in the saddle under a sun that beat down without mercy from a cloudless blue sky. Dust and thirst and weariness in this job of chasing the elusive Palomas, who was now reported to be gathering more cattle in the mountains to increase the herd he was holding on good feed and water somewhere in the hills.

Sometimes Black Jack and his men were forced to make dry camps, for water was scarce. Their horses were gaunt-flanked, sweat-marked; the riders unshaven, with eyes made red by sun and dust; living and riding on slim rations and bad water.

Yet no man complained. They were gambling for big stakes. They were after the hated Palomas. Once those cattle were sold across the Border Black Jack's pack would ride back into some remote little Mexican town and celebrate until their money was gone. They would dance and drink and fight and make love to dark-eyed señoritas. What was a little hardship like this when a man could be thinking of the good times to come when they had broken the Palomas gang and avenged the deaths of their friends?

Dobe, looking smaller than he really was in the big saddle Black Jack had rigged for him, trailed along with the remuda. He was forgetting his grief, and he was enduring the grueling hardships of the trail as well as any man. He always was ready to grin. Every man, save the yellow-eyed Withers, liked the boy. Withers seemed to hate him unreasonably but showed it only in subtle ways. And the boy sensed the enmity, but kept his mouth shut, as he had been brought up to do.

"What do you aim to do with that kid?" Withers asked Black Jack, as the outfit sat around the evening campfire.

"Put him in school across the Border. Give him a chance to be somethin' besides a cattle-thief."

"If we jump Palomas he's goin' to be as handy as a busted leg. This is no outfit for a button like him to trail with."

"I'll 'tend to that."

"Just the same, Black Jack, a kid's in the way on this kind of a *pasear* and you're about the only man in the outfit that won't admit it. Hell, I ain't the only one that feels like I do. Ask the rest of the boys. They figure he's a hoodoo."

"What they bin drinking'?" grinned Black Jack.

"Alkalai water. Black Jack, we're gettin' close to where Palomas is supposed to be gatherin' cattle. The men are gettin' on edge because they know it won't be the easy pickin's we had at the adobe corral. Palomas has plenty of men who know how to fight. We'll be out-numbered like we was the time he jumped us last year. And a hoodoo ain't helpin' our odds any. Leave him at some Mexican ranch, and forget him!"

BLACK JACK looked hard at Withers, then at the men around the campfire. Dobe had rolled up in his blankets an hour ago, dead tired from the long day's trip.

"Just how do you boys feel about Dobe?" Black Jack asked them in an unhurried drawl.

Nobody spoke. Just looked at one another uneasily. Withers grinned faintly.

"Come out with it," said Black Jack roughly. "What's it all about? Can't you talk?"

"Personal," said a bearded man, "we none of us want to harm the young 'un. He's a good li'l' button and we like him. We got nothin' again' Dobe. But like Withers says, a kid's bound to be in the way when the fightin' starts. . . And a hoodoo is a hoodoo. No gettin' around that."

"He tried to kill you at the adobe corral," added another.

Black Jack's grin widened. "He shore did, the game li'l' rooster! But if I don't hold that again' him, why should you?"

"Because it's a bad sign," said another man. "Bad luck, sure as hell."

Black Jack looked at the men who had spoken, contempt in his hard gray eyes. "You're runnin' off the head like a bunch of school girls. Bad luck—Hoodoo! I thought I'd hired a bunch of tough men that wasn't scared of anything this side of hell. Somebody's bin jobbin' you, throwin' a scare into you, that's all. Scared of a boy that never hurt anybody. Not even me when he taken a shot at me.

I don't know who's bin throwin' this load into you but I'm makin' a guess. I ain't exactly blind or dumb. I'll take that up with him, personal. Now what's the bad luck stuff? Where does the hoodoo part come in. You, with the black whiskers, what is it all about?"

Withers spoke up, rolling a fresh cigarette. "Why don't you ask the kid to tell us how he saw the Murder steer the night before the adobe corral fight?"

There was a tense uneasy silence. Dobe had given Black Jack his word that he would not mention the Murder steer to anybody. Then Withers must have been evesdropping the evening when he and Dobe had sat together on the bank of the creek. That was it. And Withers had quietly, in his own peculiar manner, spread the news among the others. Black Jack unbuckled his gun belt and took off his hat.

"Shed your guns, Withers. You're mighty handy when it comes to pickin' on kids. Let's see just how tough you are when you tackle a growed-up man!"

CHAPTER THREE

Withers Rides Alone

WADE WITHERS nodded, an animal-like glitter in his puma's yellow eyes. Here was a chance to beat Black Jack Jackson and take command. Few men along the Border ever challenged the tawny-haired killer to a fight of any kind. He had killed two men with his bare hands, and he was eager to kill again.

Down in his heart he had always hated Black Jack because the latter had never showed the proper sort of fear for his fighting prowess. Besides, he had another motive for wanting to kill the black-haired outlaw. Withers wanted to be chief in command of all the Border rustlers. Once he got rid of Black Jack, he would take up the fight with Palomas, Palomas who now paid him a fancy price to keep him informed regarding the movements of Black Jack.

Withers it was who had betrayed Black Jack a year ago. It was he, not the unfortunate Texas cowboy who had been a traitor. It was none other than Withers who had engineered the fight at the adobe corral. By God, he'd tell all that to Black Jack when he was slowly choking him to death, here in the light of the campfire!

And then he would take these men, join Palomas, and kill Palomas even as he was now going to kill the notorious Black Jack. After that, La Paloma would care for him all the more. Did she not hate that half-brother of hers? That 'breed devil who had beaten her and put her into the cantina to dance for gringo *barrachons?*

Dreams of a Border kingdom in smuggling and wanton killing fired the brain of Wade Withers as he shed the two guns he always wore. He needed no guns to crack the neck of that lanky Black Jack who, though well made, lacked the bull neck, the thick muscles, the hairy paws of his antagonist. He grinned derisively.

"You won't fight again, Black Jack, after to-night."

Somebody threw more mesquite wood on the fire so that it made the desert bright as day. The circle that formed was silent, expectant. More than one of them had been waiting for the two men to lock horns. Now that time had come, the thing precipitated by a small, red-headed, freckle-faced boy who lay sound asleep in his blankets over yonder at the edge of the firelight.

No bets were made, there was no time. The two men were at one another, pounding and wrestling. This was a rough-and-tumble fight, no holds barred.

This was more than a mere fist-fight,

it was a battle that would never be forgotten. More than one of those men had seen the burley Withers break men with his hairy hands. Few of them had ever seen Black Jack fight with his fists. Never quarrelsome, he kept out of fights. Not a man of them gave him a chance to win.

Withers fought like a bulldog, with hands and feet and teeth. Black Jack lashed out with swings that often missed. More than often the two were on the ground; Withers pounding and trying to gouge out Black Jack's eyes, Black Jack, fighting clean, ripping in blow after blow that smeared the other man's face with blood and blinded the yellow eyes.

Withers, ducking a hard swing, spat blood in the man's face. "Your turn next, you snaky son!" he snarled.

Then Black Jack tore in, his long, lean-muscled arms swinging wildly. Withers retreated a few paces, trying to cover up, then he charged with a sudden, butting rush that sent Black Jack off balance. As he went down, Withers was on top of him, chewing and gouging, bending all his strength to blind this man he hated, and then choke him to death. Black Jack knew that he was fighting for his life now.

Withers' voice sounded in his ears. Withers, cursing him, taunting him, telling him how he'd knock the Dobe kid on the head when the fight was over.

Twice, three times, Black Jack tried to get out from under that punishment. But Withers was too heavy, too powerful, too skilled in rough-and-tumble fighting. Withers was slowly crushing him, beating him. . . killing him.

Then the roar of a gun, the sobbing cry of a boy. Black Jack couldn't see, and his ears were ringing so that he couldn't hear the shrill voice of Dobe. But he felt Withers' grip relax from his throat. With one terrific effort he upset the yellow-eyed killer and was on his feet. Withers was up almost at the same instant, after him again.

MORE wary now, Black Jack kept out of his way. His eyes were clearing, his brain less confused as strength pulsed back into his arms. Then he went after Withers, went after him with two hard, bruised fists that were finding their mark each time. He rocked that yellow head with a swinging right and left. He threw two more into Withers' mid-section, just under the ribs. He followed up his advantage, throwing aside Withers' arms, hitting him where he pleased as the other fought back, vainly trying to bring Black Jack into another clinch.

Through it all shrilled the voice of Dobe. Somebody had taken the small boy's gun away from him and was holding him back.

Withers went down. Black Jack let him get up, then knocked him down again, and three more times until Withers lay in the firelight, a motionless, bloody heap.

Dobe, yelling like an Indian, was dancing up and down.

"Lemme kick him in the pants, Black Jack. Just once. I'd of plugged him only they jerked my gun up. I had a bead on 'im."

"You and that gun will git into trouble some day, young feller. And I ain't so sure about that dead bead you had on 'im." Black Jack turned to the others, wiping the blood from his face. His hand was on Dobe's shoulder as he faced them.

"Is there anybody else that claims Dobe ain't comin' along?"

"So far as I'm concerned," grinned the big cowpuncher who had taken the boy's gun away from him, "he's plumb welcome. Here's your gun, Dobe. I hope you never go gunnin' for me."

"When Withers come out of it, he's

quittin' camp. Any man that wants to go with him is welcome to hit the trail."

Black Jack buckled on his gun belt. He was about to go to the creek to clean up when he saw a bright pink envelope lying almost at the edge of the fire. He had seen other envelopes of that color. Envelopes that contained notes from La Paloma, sister of the half-breed Palomas. He picked it up and took a note from it, a perfumed note. . . .

As he read it, Black Jack's battered face twisted in a snarl. For in it were contained detailed instructions from Palomas. Withers was to arrange that fight at the adobe corral while he, Palomas, was gathering his next herd in the mountains. Black Jack shoved the note into his pocket. Then he went through Withers' pockets, finding several more notes.

Withers groaned and managed to sit up.

"Kick him to his feet, Dobe," said Black Jack grimly. "Go to it, button," and the grinning cowboys looked on as the small boy kicked the yellow-eyed killer to his feet.

"Withers," said Black Jack, holding the perfumed letters in his hand, "I just found out what kind of low-down snake you are. If there was a tree near here I'd hang you. I'm lettin' you go. Go on back to Palomas. Tell him I'm on his trail and I'm takin' his herd. As for you, I'm killin' you where I find you. Vamoose."

Wade Withers stood there, covered with blood and dirt, swaying on wide-spread legs. His eyes were bloodshot yellow slits of hate. He spoke through bruised, bleeding lips! *"Adios,* Black Jack. When you cross my trail next time I'll have a gun in my hand and it'll be smokin'."

He rode away into the night on his big buckskin. But before he reined his horse away from the fire he looked down at them from his saddle. "The Dobe brat saw the Murder steer. Remember that when your hard luck comes. Remember that when Palomas is mowin' you down with hot lead. *Adios."*

Then he was gone into the night silence. The campfire became a bed of coals. One by one the men drifted to bed.

Near where Black Jack sat alone little Dobe lay wrapped in his blankets. That night Black Jack slept with his gun in his hand, and through his dreams trotted a huge black outlaw steer branded Murder.

IN the Cantina Tivoli the black-haired, brown-eyed La Paloma danced to the accompaniment of guitar and castanets.

Down in the mountains her swaggering, cold-blooded, half-caste brother. Palomas, was starting northward for the Border with his big herd of stolen cattle.

Not so many miles away Black Jack Jackson and his men rode their leg-weary horses through the mesquite and malpai, a dust-powdered, grim-lipped, hard-eyed cavalcade, bent on revenge.

Somewhere between the barren desert and the rock-strewn mountains rode a lone man, his face a battered pulp, his yellow eyes puffed and evil looking. Now and then he took a pull at a bottle of tequila that was too warm to be palatable. But Wade Withers was a bearer of evil tidings and he needed something to take the fear out of his heart, because Palomas was a brutal task-master. And as Wade Withers rode alone under the stars he tried to make plans—desperate plans, because he was making his last stand and he knew it.

More than anything on this earth Wade Withers wanted La Paloma, but La Paloma was hard to attain. With all of the Borderland seeking her smiles, she had changed from the girl she had been a few years ago when Palomas had brought her to Juarez. Then she had no stockings, her slippers were scuffed, dust-soiled. She had

worn a cheap, tawdry little dress that needed washing, as did her neck, thickly coated with cheap talcum powder. She was fresh from the rancho then, unspoiled by Border life. but she could dance—dance as no other entertainer in that Border town.

So, as he rode through the night, Wade Withers dreamed of her smiles and the warmth of her lips, and too, he wondered how he would go about killing Palomas. Palomas was always well-guarded. He had many enemies, even among his own men. Then he smiled with his battered lips.

He need not tell all the truth to Palomas, a few clever lies and he could precipitate that battle between Black Jack and Palomas, let them fight it out. Palomas might be killed, Black Jack also. That would leave Wade Withers in command. He would deliver the cattle, pocket the profits, take La Paloma and go to the Argentine. He took another drink of the hot tequila. He wondered if he was getting too drunk. He might have to make a gun play if Palomas was in an ugly mood and ordered him shot. No, he wasn't drunk. . . One more drink before he got there.

The moon had just come up. The stars seemed almost within reach. He'd like to pull them all down and give them to La Paloma as a man might give her diamonds . . . One more drink.

Suddenly Withers reined up so abruptly that the big buckskin gelding was pulled back on his haunches.

There, in an open place among the brush thickets, stood a black steer. A steer twice the size of any ordinary steer, with horns of incredible spread. On the left side side of the steer was the brand that seemed scabbed, unhealed: *Murder!*

With a harsh, hoarse cry Withers jerked his six-shooter. He emptied it at the steer that stood facing him, shaking its head; tossing its wide horns, and then, as the yellow-eyed killer clawed for the other gun he always carried, the steer charged.

Withers was like a man paralyzed by the clammy clutch of a nightmare. He was unable to move; the gun in his hand was as useless as a small stick.

The buckskin horse twisted and jumped sideways as the steer, bawling, slobbering, tore past. There was the crunch of sand and gravel under those cloven, flinty hoofs; the echo of a slobbering bellow. And the Murder steer was gone.

Wade Withers sat his horse, shaken, numb, his body clammy with sweat. It was some time before he could shove fresh cartridges into his empty gun. It was like some horrible dream, unreal, impossible. Had he seen the Murder steer, or was it that damned overheated tequila that had set fire to his brain?

Now out of the night, rode half a dozen men. Guns covered Wade Withers. The strangers came to a halt.

"Quién es?" barked a harsh voice. The voice of the bandit half-breed, Palomas.

"It's Wade Withers, *compadre.*"

There followed a stream of cursing. "What in hell do you shoot at?" Palomas snarled. *"Madre de Dios,* stampeding the cattle, waking tired men from their sleep. *Barrachon!* Drunken, loco gringo, shooting at the moon and scaring the cattle. I have cut the ears off men for a hell of a lot less than that. And why are you here and not with the Black Jack gringo, anyhow? What is the matter with your face? Give me that bottle. . . . *Diablo!* Hot as a fire blaze. No wonder you go loco, drinking hot tequila." He threw the bottle away.

There in the moonlight Withers could see the face of the yellow-skinned Palomas. A handsome, knife-scarred face with hot, smoldering black eyes. His mouth was full-lipped, twisted always by a knife

scar that gave it a sardonic, cruel leer. He wore the leather jacket and leggings of the *charro*. His big sombrero was silver-crusted, pulled at a rakish angle across his eyes. He sat his horse with an insolent air that was a challenge to any man.

Now he laughed unpleasantly, mockingly. "*Dios*, what a face! Come on to camp, Withers. Your eyes look as if you have watched the passing of a ghost!"

CHAPTER FOUR

New Trails

"AND so, Dobe," said Black Jack, "I'm leavin' you in camp with Sam. You and him together kin hold off half of Mexico. Sam, if I don't get word back to you by to-morrow, take Dobe and high-tail it for the Border. Here's money to take care of you both."

So Black Jack Jackson led his men into the night, leaving a small, freckle-faced boy with wet eyes, and a giant Negro who was armed like an arsenal.

Black Jack rode in the lead. There was the scrape of shod hoofs, the creak of saddle leather, the tinkle of spurs, the scraping of brush against bull-hide chaps. Cigarettes glowing in the faint light of a rising moon. Black Jack was going after Palomas.

For miles ragged mountains rose to the left, purple-black against the pale sky, then the topography began to change. They were in the hills. There was the smell of grass and water. They were nearing the danger goal now. Black Jack passed word back along the line.

"Out with the cigarettes. Keep your guns ready. No talkin'. Spread out and watch for anything."

Half an hour. Then from yonder in the distance showed the light of a campfire. That would be the camp of Palomas.

Black Jack knew his enemy's habits. Too proud to stand guard at night, he preferred the light of a campfire, the music of a guitar, the songs of the vaquero, the taste of tequila as he sat smoking, half drunk, dreaming of red lips and knife blades. He would be squatted there, rubbing the blade of a knife along the leather of his boot, bragging of his past escapades, boasting of his fightnig prowess. That would be where Black Jack would find the man he wanted. The Border scourge, the cold-blooded murderer who had made an orphan of Dobe.

"You boys locate that herd and hold it," said Black Jack. "I'm goin' over and see what's sittin' around the fire."

"There might be a dozen of 'em, Black Jack. Let some of us go along. It ain't like we want to not take orders, but damn it, we ain't goin' to see you git killed!"

Black Jack grinned. That was the kind of loyalty he liked. He hesitated a minute.

"I'll take along one man. Who wants the job?"

Every man there wanted it. Black Jack's grin widened. He picked the pardner of the Texas boy Withers had killed, a big Texan whose nerve had been tried many a time.

"The rest of you boys hold that herd. If a bullet with my name on finds me, my cut of the cattle money goes to Dobe. Good luck, boys, and so-long."

As the two neared the campfire they heard guitar music. It was Palomas, singing a ribald Mexican song. Half a dozen men squatted around the fire.

They rode on boldly towards the campfire. Nobody stopped them. Apparently Palomas was unprepared for any attack. That was due to the clever lying that Withers had used to save his own hide. He had told Palomas that Black Jack had turned southward on a blind trail.

Just beyond the rim of the firelight Black Jack dismounted.

The song finished, Palomas lifted his bottle to his mouth. Then his ugly eyes became slits and he lowered the bottle. Black Jack's gun was covering him.

"If one of your men makes a bad move, Palomas, I'll kill you. Take it easy; mine ain't the only gun coverin' you. I come to make a little cattle dicker. I'm buyin' your herd. Payin' one peso for it." He tossed a peso into the big sombrero that lay on the ground beside the bandit leader.

"There's your pay. Now, if you're a good shot, you might live to spend it. Step out of the firelight with your gun in your hand. Stand up, you damned murderin' dog or I'll shoot you where you sit. Stand up and fight!"

The big Texan back in the shadow was swearing softly. Withers was not there at the campfire. He had lost his meat.

"Move a finger or wiggle an ear," the Texas cowboy drawled, "and you'll eat breakfast in hell. Take Palomas, Black Jack. I got these coyotes where they can't horn in!"

MURDERER, torturer, butcher, that yellow-skinned Palomas, but not a coward. He got to his feet, slowly drawing his gun. He walked beyond the rim of the firelight where Black Jack waited. Out there the light was dim. Only their shadows could be seen.

"I'm givin' you a better chance than you deserve, Palomas. Let's go!"

Two guns roared in the shadows. Roared once and then again. And Palomas went down, pitching from the shadow into the rim of the firelight where he lay, face downward.

Black Jack had dropped to his knees just as he fired the shot that brought Palomas down. He squatted there now, then started to rise. But even as he made the effort he went over sideways as a shot tore past his head. Then more shots. The scream of a man mortally hit.

"Take 'er easy, Black Jack," drawled the Texan. "I'll tend to you in a second. I just got me my meat. And them Mexicans didn't lie when they said Withers had puma eyes and could see in the dark. He shot at you, but he missed. I didn't. Even puma eyes reflect firelight."

The big Texan dragged the dead body of Withers into the rim of the firelight. Square between the staring yellow eyes was a bullet hole.

From the distance came the sound of shooting, then silence. Then a wild cowboy yell. Black Jack, bandaging a wounded thigh, grinned. "We licked 'em. The Palomas gang is busted."

In the light of the campfire an hour later the Palomas renegades faced Black Jack Jackson. He spoke to them curtly, hatred for them showing in his eyes.

"I'm settin' you all afoot in the mountains, without guns. If you are good at walkin' you'll be out of this part of the country in a week. There's water along the trail. I'll stake you to grub. I give you one week to quit the country. I'm givin' orders to my men to kill every one of you he finds after that week is up. Five dollars a scalp. That's all you're worth. Palomas is dead. Here he lays for you all to look at. Hit the trail!"

A WEEK later a big bunch of wet cattle was slipped across the Border and sold to ready buyers. No questions were asked. Wet cattle are wet cattle.

Back across the Border Black Jack and his men made camp. They had no cook, because Sam had taken Dobe into El Paso to a certain address given him by Black Jack.

At their camp on the Mexican side, Black Jack paid off his men. Again they would scatter until they got word that Black Jack Jackson wanted them.

Alone, Black Jack rode into Juarez. He stopped at the Cantina Tivoli and stepped

off his big black horse and went inside. La Paloma was dancing. Black Jack waited until she had finished her number. As she started for a booth, he halted her. She scowled at him, annoyed.

"Who are you? What you want?"

"I'm returnin' some letters you wrote. Thought you might want to read 'em over nights when you can't sleep. My name is Black Jack Jackson. *Adios,* señorita."

He left her standing there, the rouge on her cheeks looking like bloodstains against the white of her cheeks. She was staring with wide, frightened eyes at the little package of letters in their perfumed pink envelopes.

Then Black Jack got on his horse and rode across the bridge into El Paso. He rode up a street to a small bungalow that was painted white. Leaving his horse at the gate he walked up the pathway and rapped on the door.

The door opened. A big, wide-shouldered man opened the door. Pinned to his vest was a gold badge. He had a grizzled white moustache and snow-white hair? There was a look of blank astonishment on his weather-beaten face.

"Black Jack Jackson," he said slowly. "What in hell fetches you here?"

"Remember Dave Cline that worked for you when you run the T O outfit?"

"Couldn't help but remember him, the red-headed wildcat. Saved my life once."

"Dave's dead; so is his wife. But they left a kid, Sheriff. A button about twelve years old. I fetched him up from Mexico."

"Along with them wet cattle you slipped past us?" smiled the big law officer.

"Somethin' like that. Listen, Sheriff Tom, you've knowed me a long time. You know I don't lie. I'm through handlin' wet cattle. I'm quittin' the country. But I ain't quittin' it till I git that Dobe kid located good. Here's money to take care of him. Soon as I git located punchin' cows somewheres I'll send more. Now if you could git this Dobe stray a home with decent folks, where he'll git his chance, I'll pay the damages."

"Hmmm. Well I'll be damned!" The grizzled sheriff looked at the thick roll of bills in his hand, then at Black Jack.

"Come on in, Black Jack. Wouldn't do for a sheriff to be ketched talkin' to a outlaw. I got a little bourbon that needs the cork pulled on the bottle."

It was an hour or more later when they shook hands at the door.

"The ranch is up in Wyoming where they never heard of a damn fool cowboy named Black Jack Jackson. But just the same, change your name to the one that's in this letter. I've bin wantin' the right kind of a man to ramrod the spread. It's a good layout and you just bought a half interest in it. There's a school near the ranch where Dobe kin go. I'll ship him up to you. Now git to hell out of here before somebody sights us, standin' here like two gossipin' wimmen."

* * *

DOWN in Mexico, outlined in the light of the moon, not far from the adobe corral, stood a lone black steer. Larger than any steer ever seen in Mexico or on this side of the Border. Gaunt-flanked, with a tremendous spread of horns, he stood there as one outlawed from his kind. Across his left side was an unhealed scabbed brand: *Murder.*

THE END

In the October 15th Issue **Out September 28th!**

A Great Novelette of the Texas Rangers

RANGERS—KEEP OUT!

by Harry F. Olmsted

BULLET VERDICT

By CLIFF FARRELL

(Author of "Killers—Back to Back," etc.)

Sometimes a fugitive in prison stripes can ferret out a misdeal of justice better than a range-land sheriff. But it takes a heap of fighting-guts as well as a clear conscience to do it!

TOMMY JEFFRIES became suddenly motionless. His prison uniform, sodden with rain, merged with the dripping background of water-weighted alder-brush. Rain drove harder as the bleak darkness of an October twilight thickened. The chill of the high country knifed to the marrow.

Tommy had caught the vague gleam of a wet, yellow, slicker ahead. A man was hunkered in the brush, watching the Rafter J ranch house whose ridgepole lifted against the darkening sky in the flat ahead.

Tommy inched down, conscious of his tallness. His eyes, red-rimmed after thirty-six hours of hunted flight, bored

the rain and made identification. It was confirmation, rather, for Tommy had already guessed that nobody but grim old Ben Cool, sheriff of Cloud County, would be lying there in the rain with such stolid patience that defied discomfort.

Ben Cool had known that a mountain man would track for the high country first-off. And he had gambled that Tommy would try to see his mother and brother before hitting the long trail.

Bitter futility clutched at Tommy. He threw the feeling off with a sudden surge of anger. He wouldn't be taken now, not after what he had gone through. Eighty miles of heart-breaking, skulking flight lay behind him. Eighty miles on foot, and every step of it dangerous. With the prospect of food, a horse, a gun and the security of the trackless Blue Cloud range within reach, he would bow to no one, least of all Ben Cool.

The rain was sheeting down in the teeth of a sharp wind. It rattled the brush and moaned through the sycamores by the creek. It blotted out any sounds he made as he bellied closer.

Ben Cool was watching the darkened bulk of the ranch. His grizzled head was turtled in his slicker, his sodden hat pulled down to his big, weathered ears.

Tommy inched to within ten feet, drew up his knees and sprang. He could feel the bear-like power of the veteran officer as they crashed flat, with Tommy's arms wound in a steely coil to clench Cool's gun-hands. For an instant Tommy feared that he had failed. Then desperation came to a froth of power in him and he pinned the sheriff down in the wet grass.

He felt the bulge of a holstered gun beneath Cool's slicker. He tore it out and jammed it in its owner's back.

"Don't make me pull it, Ben," he gritted.

For an instant the sheriff seemed to weigh his chances. Surrender never had been his creed. But he had read the intent in Tommy's voice correctly. And he knew that Tommy Jeffries had no love for him. It was Ben Cool who had helped hound Tommy to prison.

He relaxed. "You better pull it while you've got the trigger, Jeffries," he stated. "I'll take you back—some day."

TOMMY did not answer. He was listening. But no louder movement of the brush other than the wind whistle came to him. "Lone wolfin' as usual, eh, Ben?" he asked. "You knew I'd try to see my folks before I drifted down the country. You were careless."

"I had you slated as comin' on that horse you stole this mornin' east of the Tincups," the sheriff admitted.

"I stole the horse and turned it loose to build up a false trail," Tommy explained. "I was safer afoot in crossin' the Tincups. I could pick my own route."

"I'll have misery ketchin' you in the Blue Clouds," Cool declared. "But I'll get you, sooner or later."

"You won't take me alive," Tommy promised grimly. "You can believe that, Ben Cool. I killed those two sheepers right enough. But it was self-defense; they tried to gulch me. They missed with their first one. I got them. King Dudley and his outfit framed me into the pen. You protected their lyin' witnesses."

"That's what they all say," the sheriff derided. "You got a jury trial. You was found guilty."

Tommy waved a weary gun toward the ranch. "Do you happen to know where mom an' Hal are—or wouldn't you tell me?"

"Tack Alber's wife an' kids was taken with scarlet fever this mornin'," Cool said. "Your maw is likely down there. An' your brother maybe drove her down. The buckboard is missin'."

"Do they know?"

"About you jumpin' the pen? I reckon

not, unless that telegraph operator in Cloud City couldn't keep his mouth shut. I figured I'd have a better chance if it was kept quiet. These Snow Valley cowmen stick together too tight. I didn't poll one solitary vote in this valley last election, all because of you."

"But you ran strong in the sheep camps, I take it," Tommy scorched him. "March. We'll get in the dry an' wait for Hal. Keep your hands up. I know you're waitin' for me to bat an eye so you can jump me. I'm not winkin', Ben."

He prodded the stubborn sheriff into the kitchen of the low-ceilinged log house. Striking a match, he lighted a lamp.

The curtained windows, rag rugs and potted flowers sent a stab of pain through him. His mother had visited him often at prison, bearing her soul-torture with a smile for his benefit. But he had known what it cost her.

The approach of a team sounded. A buckboard rattled into the wagon shed. Tommy prodded the sheriff into the dark living room.

"No matter what happens, Hal isn't in on this," he warned.

Cool's craggy face remained frosty. "I'll call on him to help me," he rasped. "If he don't, he's liable under the law."

"Turn around," Tommy gritted. "Don't talk law to me. Aren't you human? Turn around."

With the sheriff's back to him, Tommy jerked a lariat from a peg. In a moment he had the officer bound hand and foot. Then he forced a gag into his jaws.

"You can probably make sounds enough to let Hal know you're here," he breathed. "If you do, I'll buffalo you with your own gun, so help me!"

He rolled the sheriff under the big, square center table, whose sides were draped by a flowered lambrequin. Then he returned to the kitchen. The team had been unrigged and he could hear their hoofs thudding in the stalls as they began feeding.

Hal Jeffries opened the kitchen door, unhooking his slicker. His jaw went slack. He had expected some passing rider or neighbor who was finding shelter from the storm.

"Yep, it's me—on the hoof," Tommy said, trying to grin down his own emotion.

His brother's eyes drifted down the muddy, wet denim, and understanding came to him. He crossed the room in long strides. They gripped hands for a silent minute, their eyes delving deep. They stood of a height, these brothers, with the same wide sweep of shoulder, the same straight jaw and nose. Hal, the younger, was also the fairer, his crisp hair inclining to the red more than to brown, his cheeks a trifle less flat.

"Where's mom?" Tommy asked. "I sort of wanted to see her before I hit for the Blue Clouds. She'll understand, though."

"She's nursin' Tack Albers' brood," Hal said, his voice husky. "I didn't know—I didn't hear that you—"

"I got my chance yesterday mornin'," Tommy explained grimly. "I took it. Here I am. How're things goin' with you?"

A window burst with a crash. At the same time the door was ripped open. Dripping forms filled the frames. Gun barrels glinted in the lamplight. Hard eyes peered over the sights.

"Everythin's fine," a rasping, triumphant voice said.

THE speaker came in, bulwarked behind a brace of .45's. He was forced to duck his head to clear his round, black hat in the door. His head reared up from a long neck without much sign of a chin. Two others stepped in at his heels, guns gripped.

"Span the roof with your claws, you two," the lean leader rasped. "Take their cutters, Dirk. Keep 'em centered, Nash."

The brothers glanced at each other. Tommy shook his head warningly, and they lifted their arms slowly. Tommy forced back his black, raging despair.

"It's enough tuh gag a man, Hal," he remarked casually to his brother. "What is it?"

"Sheep," Hal spat. 'Nothin' but sheep."

King Dudley, who dressed like a tramp and counted his bleating woolies in the tens of thousands, cursed them furiously. His two brothers chimed in. These three Dudleys varied in physique but not in character. Dirk, the middle one, was heavy of neck, the hue of an old saddle and with a coarse hair line that ran close to his thick, black brows. Nash, the youngest, ran to fat and meanness.

"Ben Cool will be mighty glad to see you," King Dudley addressed Tommy. "One of my herders seen yuh skulkin' up the Tincups this noon. I phoned Marble City an' found out you had jumped the calaboose yesterday mornin'."

"That's the truth," Tommy marveled. "How come you told it, King? You must not be yourself tonight."

"You'll do every day of your fifteen years for this," the sheepman snarled. "They don't give good behavior ner paroles to runaways at Marble City."

"Thursday is the day I hate worst of all," Tommy said steadily. "They feed mutton stew then. It always reminds me of your sheep-walkin' liars that you paid to perjure me into the pen."

Dudley laughed mirthlessly. "It was cheap at the price," he boasted. "There's been no cowmen throwin' down on my riders since then."

Tommy turned to his brother. "This is a red-letter day," he observed loudly. "The Dudleys have told the truth twice in a row. King admits that they framed me."

"Take him out, Nash," King snarled.

Nash Dudley tossed a loop over Tommy, bound his arms and marched him out into the rain. Awaiting there in the drip were three armed sheepmen, holding the horses. One of them was snagging a mount from the Forked J cavvy for Tommy's use.

King and Dirk Dudley did not follow immediately. They closed the door and eyed Hal Jeffries critically.

"Fifteen years is a long time for a young fellow," King remarked.

"You won't be around when he gets out, King," Hal Jeffries stated, his eyes like darts of cold fire.

"Now there's no call to threaten me," the sheepman deprecated. "I'm only doin' my duty. We can't have convicts runnin' around loose."

Hal eyed him. "Spit it out, skunk," he snapped. "What's in your craw? You're not lingerin' here because you like to. You're on the wrong side of the Tincup rim. This valley is plenty poisonous for your breed!"

The Dudleys rumbled oaths. For years Snow Valley had been a spearpoint thrust into the heart of their mighty sheep domain. They had fought, connived and schemed to wipe it out and consolidate their holdings which surrounded it on three sides.

But Snow Valley had remained cow range through thick and thin, through open warfare that had stained the high passes of the Tincups with the crimson gore of fighting men. Even through the more deadly, sapping strife of secret struggle, where riders were cut down by murderous bullets from the chaparral and brake, cow range it seemed sure to remain. For the ranchers of Snow Valley were united in what amounted to a blood oath.

"Your maw would take it right hard if he went back for the full stretch, wouldn't she?" King Dudley prodded relentlessly.

Hal's lean form tightened, but the Dudleys were alert. The hammers of their guns came up, and they stepped back hastily.

"One jump an' we'll blast your heart out!" King snarled.

Hal steeled himself to wait. A better chance might come. "I reckon mom can stand it," he said. "She knows he's innocent. That means a lot to a mother."

The Dudleys glanced at each other, angry and baffled. Nash nodded significantly. They had a hole card to play. One that they had hoped they would not have to produce.

"Too bad, too bad," King grated. "I hate to see a feller go to the gallows at his age."

Hal studied them. "Gallows?"

"Sure," King smiled coldly. "Murder is a hangin' offense in this state."

"Murder?"

King simulated surprise. "Didn't your brother tell you that he beefed one of our herders this afternoon down near our Boilin' Springs camp?"

Hal drew a long, slow breath. "So that's it," he gritted. "Another frame-up!"

HE UNDERSTOOD them, and they knew that he understood. If there was no corpse as yet the Dudleys would no doubt furnish it. Also, they'd furnish witnesses to hang the murder on Tommy. Their sheep camps were supplied with human derelicts for both purposes.

There was silence, broken only by the slow, steady beat of the clock in the living room. Hal merely flayed them with his eyes.

"I might forget that I had caught Tommy if me and you could get together on a business deal," King finally began.

Hal nodded. "I savvy," he said. "You want my ranch. You aim to hook your fangs into Snow Valley."

"I'm thinkin' of your mother," King taunted. "Ten thousand in cash, an' your brother's life. I'll meet you in Cloud City at the courthouse at nine o'clock tomorrow mornin'. Have your deed ready, fella. That offer closes if you're not there."

They kicked the door open and went out, sending ironic grins back over their shoulders.

A splatter of hoofs sounded. Hal, with a blistering curse, jerked a carbine from the gunrack in the living room. He leaped into the driving storm. But he paused, with the gun half lifted. He could not take a chance on hitting Tommy. He stood there as the hoof beats were soaked up by the moan of the swaying brush and the drumming downpour.

He went back into the kitchen and paused, rooted by a welter of raging emotions, his eyes staring blankly at a wall. He was seeing Snow Valley as it would be if the gray-white hordes once leeched themselves on Rafter J land.

And like leeches they would suck the life from Snow Valley once they gained a foothold. The Rafter J commanded the headwaters of Snow River. With sheep above them, the cow outfits down the valley would go under one by one. It was inevitable. And no power could stop King Dudley if he once gained title to an acre of land in Snow Valley. He would have the law on his side then. Title to the Rafter J was equivalent to title of the whole valley to the sheepmen.

Hal thought of his mother, and he stood there a long while thinking about her. He knew what would be her fate if Tommy went to the gallows. She would find surcease from that only in the grave.

Finally he tore himself away from this black reverie with an effort. He smiled, thinly, bitterly, as though death had whispered some grim jest in his ear. The turmoil died from his eyes. He went into the dark living room and took another six-shooter from the rack. It had once been Tommy's gun. He hooked his slicker, drew up the collar, glanced around the kitchen once, then went out.

"Nine o'clock," he muttered. "I'll be there."

Soon he rode away, heading for Tack Albers' ranch where he wanted to see his mother once again before keeping his appointment in Cloud City.

TIED to a horse and bracketed between stolid, speechless sheepmen, Tommy wondered what held King and Dirk Dudley in the kitchen with his brother. He tried to pierce the rain and read the faces of the two sheepmen as they appeared and climbed their saddles. He heard King grunt something to Nash. He could not hear the words, but a new stir of uneasiness shouldered into his already black mood.

They splashed away through the roaring night, and his suspicions came suddenly to a head. He had expected them to ride northward for Cloud City. Instead, they cut the creek road eastward toward the Tincups.

"The calaboose is waitin' for me," he observed. "But it doesn't lie in the Tincups. What's on your mind, sheepers?"

"We like your company," Dirk Dudley derided.

Tommy went silent. He had a hunch, and it was right on the mark. He knew that the Dudleys would give plenty to gain a grip on Snow Valley. He cursed himself for a fool for giving them a chance to use pressure on Hal.

But Tommy had confidence in Hal. The Jeffries family always had paid their own way through life, no matter what the cost. Hal would never buckle.

Tommy's thoughts veered to Ben Cool, and he found some measure of satisfaction there. If before, the sheriff really had been ignorant of that frame-up, he was no longer so. His ears had not been gagged. He surely had heard King Dudley admit it.

"But there's too many sheep votes in this county," Tommy thought grimly. "Ben won't ever ease himself out of a soft job."

It was long past midnight when they reached a summer sheep camp just beyond a pass in the Tincups, deserted at this season. A smoky oil lamp on the table high-lighted the squalidness as Tommy was prodded inside. They bound him to a rickety chair.

There was much whispering among the Dudleys. Then King and Dirk Dudley went out. Tommy heard them ride away.

Nash Dudley and the three riders were left to guard Tommy. They fired a heat-warped stove and began cooking tea and heating a mutton stew.

They were eating when the door was suddenly thrown open. A burst of rain came in, and also Ben Cool, a sawed-off shotgun cradled in his arms. This gun, too, had come from the rack in the Rafter J living room.

Nash Dudley went rigid, a loaded knife poised. Ben Cool's eyes swept the shadows. They flicked briefly over Tommy, and a glint of relief appeared in them.

"Well, fer Pete's sake—hello, Ben!" Nash stuttered, his glance wandering uneasily to the prisoner.

"Where's King an' Dirk?" the sheriff snapped.

"King? Dirk? Why, er, they—how—"

"Don't sprain your skull tryin' to think up a lie," Cool rumbled. "They've already started for Cloud City, hey?"

Nash Dudley blinked, then scowled.

"I don't savvy that line of palaver from you, Ben," he warned. "Lower that blaster, will yuh? You act nervous."

"Up with your paws, all of yuh," the sheriff boomed. "I'm takin' charge of this prisoner. There's goin' to be a new deal on the table for Tommy Jeffries before another sunset. I just woke up an' found out that I had been beddin' down with sidewinders."

"Why, yuh old fool," Nash roared. "You know who cuts the shingles in this county, don't yuh? Get out of here! If you aim on bein' sheriff any longer, you better forget you ever seen Tommy!"

"Yeah, an' take heed to this," Cool bellowed. "I'll be sheriff long enough to see you an' King an' Dirk Dudley where they belong. I was hid out in the Rafter J ranch house tonight, an' heard King spill plenty."

Shadows moved in the open doorway behind Cool, and took sudden form. King and Dirk Dudley stepped in, jamming their guns into Cool's back.

"Freeze, yuh dumb old fool," Dirk growled. "And drop that sprayer."

THEY shoved him to the center of the room, and King Dudley glared at him savagely. "Me an' Nash spotted somebody skulkin' a skyline just after we rode out, so we came back," he explained. "So you heard a lot, hey, Ben?"

"I heard enough to prove that I'm the biggest sucker that ever wore a badge."

"I never knew before whether you was dumb, or just bein' awful slick," the lean Dudley sneered. "Now I know. An' by glory, you're honest, too! Whatcha know about that? An honest politician. So you eared in on me?"

"I listened to it all, King. You're so oily-mean, you could crawl down the barrel of a .22. You framed Tommy Jeffries. Now you're framin' tuh grab Snow Valley. You're not gettin' away with it!"

"Who says I won't?"

"The law. I'm goin' to jug you and put you over the road for conspiracy an' obstructin' justice, King."

Dudley guffawed sneeringly. "You mule-faced old simp. Don't you savvy what you've built up for yourself?"

Ben Cool looked at him and understood. "If that's the way it lays, go ahead," he said. "I'll never change my mind."

The Dudleys cursed him in chorus. "We elected you sheriff, an' now we've got to kill you to stay out of jail," King frothed. "If that ain't a hell of a note!"

Ben Cool did not answer. The sheepmen bound him hand and foot and laid him on the floor. There was only one chair in the place and Tommy occupied that.

Tommy had remained silent. Now he spoke. "Did Hal cut you loose, Ben?"

"Naw, I worked free myself after he had hit the trail."

"What was the palaver about in the kitchen after they took me out?" Tommy asked.

Ben Cool told him tersely.

"Did Hal say he'd knuckle?" Tommy asked grimly.

"What else can he do?" the sheriff snapped impatiently. "These lobo whelps are fixin' to frame a murder on you."

"Yeah, an' now we've got the victim," King Dudley rasped. "I'll give you one guess, Ben."

The two elder Dudleys were hooking their slickers again.

Dirk Dudley was snarling profanely. "It's goin' to be a dirty job," he complained. "I don't hone for it, but it's got to be done. All I hope is that you two give Nash a good excuse to let you have it. Why don't you make a bust for it?"

"Yeah, leavin' the lousy end of it to me," Nash grouched.

Tommy and Ben Cool looked at each other. Thus had they heard their death

sentences pronounced, casually, heartlessly by men who had no stomach for the task, but who meant to go through with it.

"Just like killin' sheep," Tommy muttered to Cool.

King and Dirk Dudley rode away. Nash Dudley and the three vacant-eyed sheepmen sat down to their cold meal again. But Nash had no appetite now. He glared at the prisoners with livid resentment. He rolled a smoke with hands that shook, and arose and paced about the shack.

Tommy had been working at his bonds, but they were unyielding. Now another plan occurred to him. The chair was flimsy, with some of the rungs broken. His ankles were tied to the front legs, his arms bound to the outer frame.

He knew that by tilting forward he could stand on his feet, though he would be still tied and bent in the chair.

He reflected grimly that this would be giving Nash the incentive he needed. It would make the job easier for Nash. But it would also be easier to die in action rather than sitting there and waiting.

Tommy caught Ben Cool's eye. "The lamp!" Tommy framed with his lips, but did not say it aloud. He jerked his head slightly toward the table.

Ben Cool did not comprehend. Tommy waited until none of the sheepmen were looking, then repeated his silent signal.

The sheriff understood. He inched his body around a trifle. He was now in position to thrust out his legs and send the table spinning.

TOMMY measured the four men. The nearest, a withered, whiskery herder, with the staring, characteristic blankness of one who has been too much alone, had a worn six-gun thrust in his ragged waist band.

Tommy swung back, then forward. He tilted up awkwardly on his feet, lifting the chair free of the floor.

Nash Dudley whirled, a growl of warning rising from his throat.

Crash! The table went over. The lamp smashed on the floor as Ben Cool acted.

There was an instant of blackness. A second crash sounded. Tommy had given an awkward sidewise leap and had come down heavily with his full weight on the chair. It collapsed. The back snapped off, and his wrists came free as the thongs slipped from the broken ends. One of the legs broke, but the other survived. The debris of the chair still clung to Tommy as he launched himself through the darkness at the spot where he had marked the little sheepman.

Nash Dudley was howling orders, but all were afraid to fire for fear of hitting each other in the pitchy darkness. Then a puff of red flame leaped up as the oil on the floor ignited from the burning wick. Shadows leaped and danced.

Tommy's hands encountered flesh. His right fist drove up and he heard the herder grunt. His left glanced from a jaw. Again his right smashed in. He felt ribs snap. The sheeper was going down. The rising flames glinted on the gun.

There were two startling, ringing explosions as Tommy and Nash Dudley slashed lead at each other. Tommy felt the agonizing smash of a slug in his left forearm. But he saw Dudley flounder back and fall into the burning circle of oil, his scream of agony fading.

Tommy's trigger-finger worked with methodic speed. He blasted two slugs into another sheeper who was scuttling about insanely, endeavoring to avoid the spreading flames and trying to fire at Tommy at the same time.

The third man from a corner was pumping gunflame at Tommy, but he was in a frenzy of excitement, and his lead was spatting high into the wall.

Tommy swung his gun, and it roared twice. The last of his opponents ceased firing suddenly and slid forward on his face.

The flaring oil had flowed upon Ben Cool. His clothing was flaming, but he had uttered no sound. Tommy, with the wreckage of the chair still banging around his feet, crawled frantically to the sheriff's side, dragged him into the rain and beat out the fire with his bare hands. The sheriff was singed, but still active.

"What time is it?" Tommy cried. "Got a watch, Ben?"

Ben Cool had. It was stopped, but the fire had caused that. "Three o'clock."

Tommy tore the last of the ropes from his ankles, and went racing to a corral behind the shack where there were horses. "Come on," he panted over his shoulder. "We've got forty miles to do before nine o'clock."

KING and Dirk Dudley stood on the broad wooden steps of the Cloud City courthouse. Overhead the tower clock boomed nine strokes, and someone threw wide the paneled doors.

King Dudley gave a grunt of satisfaction. "Here he comes," he said hoarsely. "We win, Dirk. I told you he'd cave."

Hal Jeffries had appeared at a corner up the street. He ducked under a hitch-rail, and crossed the unpaved, muddy road, slanting toward them. The rain had stopped.

Dirk Dudley suddenly gave a growl of suspicion. "He's packin' two barkers," he whispered, his heavy body tensing. "Do yuh reckon—?"

King Dudley's eyes thinned. He glanced back of him. But they were too far from the courthouse door, and Hal Jeffries was too close. They would have to face it out now.

Hal paused in the mud off the sidewalk fifty feet from them. The pair on the steps remained silent. They were beginning to breathe fast, and their pulses were hammering.

"Here I am," the younger Jeffries said in a flat, metallic voice. "And here's my answer."

He tapped his guns. Hal knew that he could not hope to survive a single-handed gunfight with these two Dudleys who were known to be fast. But he meant to take both of them with him.

There was taut silence while the Dudleys measured him. They began to inch apart.

Then a second tall figure stepped from the corner of the courthouse and moved to Hal Jeffries' side. His left arm was slung in a bandage. Hal glanced at him, and smiled in surprise and grim elation.

"It's your move," Tommy Jeffries told the Dudleys. "What's your choice?"

Arms flicked downward. Blue muzzles leaped and spat bellowing tongues of flame. The reports rolled over the town, arousing screams from startled women.

A body was rolling down the courthouse steps. It sprawled on the muddy sidewalk, its chinless face twisted in the death agony. Another body lay on the steps, staring up at the broken clouds with sightless, opened eyes.

In the muddy road stood two brothers, guns in their hands, a thin haze of powder fumes slowly fading above them.

Sheriff Ben Cool appeared immediately. "I saw it all," he declared loudly. "A plain case of self-defense. The Dudleys reached first. An' I got a lot of new evidence to present at a re-trial of that manslaughter case against Tommy Jeffries. I'll prove that it was self-defense, too, an' we'll hold the preliminary hearin' at Twombly's bar. Let's get goin'!"

By RAY NAFZIGER

(Author of "Wagon Wheel Courage," etc.)

CODE OF THE

There was one thing that neighboring cow-folks said of Tip Younger—the kid who couldn't even hate a horse thief—that he wasn't a killer and a gun-hireling like his brothers. But the heritage of his Colt-wise kin rode hot in his blood, waiting the time when he'd be forced to live up to the gunman's code of "Kill or be killed."

IT LINED up with Tip Younger's character that he should start out alone and unarmed to bring in the thieves of the Morgan stallion, Yankee Doodle. Finding the drift fence at the head of Casita Creek Canyon cut, and the tracks of four riders who had hazed the stallion and his harem out of the country, young Tip Younger had hit their trail with nothing but a rope for a weapon.

If Tip's older brothers, Morg and Breck, who were away on a horse-buying trip, had taken that trail, they would have been loaded for bear, with belt-guns and rifles to kill those or the rustlers who fought, and ropes to hang those who surrendered. Morg and Breck would be frothing with rage, muttering threats as they rode, a pair of wolves that would pull down that quartet of horsethieves and laugh as they watched the rustlers' death contortions. Breck and Morg were animals when aroused, and deadly gunmen, fast, sure, nervy. Ugly rumors floated around about those two brothers, that they had killed many men in their lives.

It seemed strange that they should have a brother like Tip, who hated no one,

KILLER BREED

Gripping Novelette of the twisting gun-trails

who had never tried to kill anyone, and yet was a faster gunman than either of them. Tip, just turned twenty-two, six foot of raw-boned rider, would keep to the thieves' trail until Hell froze. But when he reached the end he would have no desire to shoot or hang the rustlers.

You'd guess that by the eyes that were blue and friendly as a small child's, by the wide mouth that grinned so often. Tip was like a friendly, playful cub, awkward on his feet, although on a horse he was grace itself and the finest bronc stomper in a thousand square miles of cattle country. He was a queer fellow, Tip Younger, with a tolerance even for horsethieves.

A hundred miles from Casita Creek Canyon, he came to the country into which he was certain Yank and his mares had been taken. The Red Pigeon country, it was called after its only town. Shutting it off from the world was a high granite scarp gashed by deep canyons, with slide rock and talus at its foot. A hard-looking, rough country, this Red Pigeon one, where Short Bill Carwan and his outlaw gang holed up, emerging for raids on horse and cattle ranches, and, occasionally, on banks or trains. The chances were that Short Bill or some of his men had stolen Yankee Doodle and his mares. Which meant that it was suicide to try to get back the stallion. Short Bill Carwan was a killer with many notches on his twin guns, and his band was made up of men almost as dangerous.

Tip had followed Yankee Doodle's tracks so far, and no matter where they

led, he was going on. He had a gun now, an ancient six-shooter lent him by a rancher who felt sure that Short Bill Carwan's gunmen would kill the boy. A few cartridges went with it, a belt and an old holster made for a different gun. With these, Tip Younger rode coolly into Short Bill Carwan's outlaw hangout, the deep maw of a white rock canyon, somber with the dark green of pines, looking bleak and threatening.

Up ahead, he caught a glimpse of a white rock house, so white it looked newly whitewashed. A pole corral and two rock corrals scattered about gave it the air of a ranch, although it could as easily be a fort.

AT THE same moment that he saw the ranch, Tip's eyes were drawn by a flash of color on a small narrow trail high above him. A rider in a vivid red shirt, holding a gun over a saddle horn, was heading jauntily toward the canyon rim. No, Tip couldn't be mistaken; that was Lee Waltis. He yelled once and waved his hat, but the rider had climbed around a clump of aspens and was out of sight.

Smoke was coming from the chimney of the white house, but Tip headed for the rock corrals where three men were sitting, cowboy fashion, on their heels. They'd been thumbing a deck of cards, but at the sound of hoofs they turned. Each of the three bearded men had guns, one a twin pair slung at his hips.

From behind the corral where the men squatted came a challenge, the shrill trumpeting that he could have told from a thousand. And then he saw the sleek red coat of Yankee Doodle behind the corral.

One of the three men got to his feet as Tip came up, a man almost as broad as he was tall. He had dark eyes, hard as obsidian. Wearing two guns also, as they had told Tip Short Bill Carwan would be armed.

"Hyah, gents," said Tip casually, and swung to the ground, lighting without being asked. "You've got a horse here that has been stole from our ranch. That bloodbay Morgan."

"Youngster," said Short Bill Carwan, his voice a menacing growl. "Don't come along sayin' there's a stole horse on my ranch. I got a bill of sale for that stallion."

"Mebbe so," admitted Tip, "but he's stole just the same. Took from our range a few days back. I followed his track straight from the pasture."

"You been followin' him alone?" demanded Carwan.

"Yeah," said Tip and at this naive admission the two men who were squatted by the wall laughed loud. But Short Bill didn't laugh.

"And yuh come ridin' in expectin' me to hand over this stallion, mebbe put the hackamore rope in yore hand?" Carwan spat out an oath at such ignorance, and all three men looked at Tip, as three vicious dogs might eye a cat before they settled him.

"Work for Mort and Breck Younger, do yuh?" said Carwan. "Seems yuh favor Breck a little. Any relation?"

"Brother," replied Tip Younger, still willing to talk it over in a friendly way, but having no doubt that in the end he'd be going away with Yank.

The fact that Tip was a brother of Breck and Morg Younger seemed to startle the men a little and again Short Bill studied the rider, noticing the old gun, slung awkwardly, too high, he thought, for a quick draw.

"Ever shoot anybody, kid?" asked Short Bill.

"No," answered Tip. "I never did. Never felt like it."

Short Bill's face split in a wolfish grin. "Yuh must be even simpler than yuh look," he snarled. "You big, stumbling loon of a half-growed calf, comin' in here—damn yuh, I'm killin' yuh."

The hard, dark eyes glittered as the big left hand swept down. Death was in Carwan's eyes, and death was in that draw. And then the obsidian eyes opened wider, seeing a flash, a blurred motion of Tip Younger's hand as his hand slapped down to the awkwardly-hung gun. A little jet of flame came from a shot that caught Short Bill's hand as it rose from the holster, plowing a trench through its back, numbing the fingers. It didn't stop there.

It killed Short Bill Carwan.

THE two men watched their chief falling, staring unbelievingly as the short, thick body took a step back to the rock wall and went down it, the bearded face twitching in agony until it suddenly stiffened and was still.

Short Bill Carwan killed by a kid cowboy! It shocked his men into immobility for a moment. Which was lucky for Tip, since he was paralyzed also as he looked down at the fallen man. Tip hadn't meant to kill Bill Carwan, but the outlaw was dead, his face contorted in a terrible death mask. Tip had merely come for Yankee Doodle—

With his gun covering the two men, he hobbled to the side of the stallion, untied the hackamore rope, and swiftly changed the saddle from his mount to Yank's sleek back. Then he pulled the Morgan around, and still keeping the men covered, slipped up into the saddle and was off at a terrific clip, racing for an arroyo bank.

Then the six-shooters opened on him, but he was riding low in the saddle, and the bushes on the arroyo's rim were just high enough to screen him. Below, he jumped Yank out into a thick clump of pines, and angled him up the canyonside, heading for the trail where he had seen his oldtime pal, Lee Waltis.

If he rode fast, he'd catch up with Lee, but the pleasure he had been anticipating in the meeting was drowned now by memory of the sick look on Short Bill Carwan as he had gone down, grimacing horribly, groaning. That shook Tip Younger. Even Yank wasn't worth killing a man for. A man had one life and when you took that, he was done for. Maybe Short Bill had bought the stallion in good faith.

He followed the trail which twisted up over the ridge on to a mesa and across it among high yellow pines. Riding the curving trail on a lope, he noted suddenly that Lee had turned off it. He'd have to ride back to pick up the tracks of Lee's horse.

As he swung Yank, Tip heard hoofs click to the side of him. Two men rode out, their rifles on him, and Tip started. The two riders were his brothers, Morg and Breck. He rode toward them, wondering how come they were in this country, but thinking more of the dead man, lying a crumpled heap against the white wall of the stone corral. A great regret filled Tip Younger. He had killed a man, and it make him sick, through and through.

CHAPTER TWO

The Killer Strain

OF THE two older brothers, Breck with pale blue eyes that looked almost white against a skin tanned to mahogany, was most like Tip. Morg, oldest of the three, looked like an Indian and was riding a big, mean-tempered black brute that suited Morg's own ugly temper.

"How come yuh over here?" demanded

Breck. "And how'd yuh know we was in this country?" They hadn't told Tip where they were going on their horse-buying trip.

"I didn't know you was here," said Tip. "But four hombres cleaned Yank and his mares outa Casita Creek. They took the mares off south somewhere, and I followed Yank to the stone-house ranch over in the canyon."

That surprised Morg and Breck though they were not easily startled. "Bill Carwan's ranch?" asked Morg. "And yuh rode in there alone to git Yank?"

"Yeah. Short Bill and two of his men were there. I told Short Bill that Yank had been stole."

The two brothers looked hard at Tip.

"What happened?" drawled Breck. "Yuh kinda got me settin' up, wonderin'."

"We talked a bit. He claimed he had a bill of sale. Asked if I was a relation of you two. After that he acted sorta mean; finally said he was goin' to kill me. I didn't know if it was just bluff or not when he pulled his gun."

Breck laughed. "Short Bill Carwan bluffing on killing someone—fat chance! Go right on, kid. What happened then, dammit? Are yuh sure it was Short Bill Carwan pulled this gun? Broad as he is long, black eyes—that's Carwan."

"It was him. I shot him as he drew. Killed him. So I switched my saddle to Yank and came away from there."

Breck and Morg looked at each other and Breck gave a short laugh. "Killed him, did yuh, kid?" he said, and he spurred his horse a little nearer Tip. "Killed Short Bill Carwan?"

"Yeah. But it was an accident. I hated to. It—"

Breck's hand came down with a tremendous thwack between Tip's shoulder blades. Yankee Doodle jumped quick as a cat, and it took Tip half a minute to calm him down. His brothers were laughing because he had killed Carwan.

"I killed him," said Tip slowly. "I didn't want to, but Carwan seemed to go sorta crazy. It was hell—seein' his face when he slid down that wall. All scrunched up, knowin' mebbe he was due to die, never to ride no more, to be throwed in a hole. Yank isn't worth doing that to any man. Nor any other horse."

The two older brothers stopped laughing. Tip was sorry for having killed Carwan, after the man had tried to kill him. Morg's ruthless face had a sneer on it. But Breck, who was more like Tip, realized what the kid was thinking.

"It hits yuh hard the first time, kid," he said. "Endin' somebody. But you'll forget it. He had those horse stole all right, and he's killed a lot of men in his time, and not by accident. Ride along with us. We're stayin' at the Rollins ranch over a coupla canyons."

"Lookin' at some horses over there?" asked Tip.

Morg laughed at that, but Breck was studying his horse's ears. "Not exactly," he told Tip. "Just stayin' there a while. We'll hit off through the brush. This country ain't exactly safe. There's a war on, and men shoot without warning. Rollins and his neighbors are fightin' this Carwan crew, and it's shoot on sight, and be damn sure you're the one that gets the first sight of the other fellow."

MORG led the way through the brush, leaving the trail to wind around through the pines. Always the two carried their rifles over their saddle horns, ready for action.

An hour later they were sloping down off a ridge into a canyon. Ahead of them without warning came the crash of a rifle, and then a few more shots. They weren't the ones the shots had been fired at, and Morg and Breck spurred on to take a look-see from a little knoll. Someone was

riding through the brush of the slope opposite them, and then they caught a glimpse of him, a red-shirted figure flashing through the trees at top speed. Morg flung himself from his saddle and rested his rifle barrel over the saddle seat.

"Sneakin' around tryin' to pot somebody, he was," he growled while waiting for the rider to pass across an open space.

But just before his finger tightened on the trigger, Tip Younger knocked the barrel aside. "You're crazy!" he told Morg. "That's Lee Waltis in that red shirt."

In a fury Morg turned on his brother. "I know it was, damn yuh!" he bawled. "That's why I wanted to kill him."

"Lee Waltis?" repeated Tip. "The best friend I ever had!"

"He ain't no friend of mine," said Morg. "He's plain polecat. One of Carwan's chief gunies. Thinks he's another Billy the Kid. He's the one probably tipped Carwan off about Yank and the mares if he didn't go over and bring 'em back himself. And keep yore hand off my gun next time or I'll—"

"Let it drop," interposed Breck. "He shot Short Bill Carwan and that's better than pottin' a dozen Lee Waltises. Listen, Tip, yuh might as well know it. Me and Morg were fightin' with this Rollins outfit against this Carwan gang who're hooked up with a bunch o' tinhorn gamblers in the county seat here. They've been stealin' Rollins' cows, ambushin' his men, tryin' to drive him outa the country. It's a war, savvy, and we're mixed in it a little."

"He couldn't savvy nothin'," growled Morg. "Too much of a damn fool."

"I wouldn't stir up a fella that was man enough to bump off Short Bill Carwan," said Breck.

In silence the three descended to the canyon bottom where the rims flattened out to low pine-covered ridges. A house, squatting with its adobe walls like a small fortress, sat on a low hill before them. Enclosing the house was a high adobe wall, whose only entrance was a big gate, made of thick, whipsawed planks, and flanked by a tower. They rode through the gate into a yard, at one end of which were horses in a rope corral, wagons, and high piles of baled hay. At the other end was the bunkhouse, with a dozen men lounging before it, all armed, all salty-looking.

From a doorway that opened into a little court stepped a rancher, Dan Rollins, his reddish-beard sprinkled with gray. He came toward the Youngers as they dismounted.

"This is our brother, Mr. Rollins," said Breck. "Morg and me would like to *habla* with yuh. Got some news."

Rollins nodded and led the way into the court, which with the rooms that surrounded it, constituted the private quarters of the ranch owner. It was a beautiful place, with a grass lawn, a pool fed by a small fountain, little cedars and pines set about. A green parrot walked up and down his perch by an umbrella tree. Below on a bench slept a big white cat.

"Wait for us, Tip," said Breck. "Morg and me we're havin' a private talk with Rollins in his office."

WHEN the three men had disappeared into one of the rooms, Tip stood looking about him curiously. Across the court, the parrot suddenly began screeching: "Rise and shine, damn yuh! Rise and shine, damn yuh!" he called, and below the bird the big cat leaped from his bench and disappeared as if shot.

A little ripple of laughter came from a side door and a girl stepped into the court. When she saw Tip she stopped laughing but continued to smile. Most everyone smiled at Tip Younger, liking

him at sight. He crossed to talk to the girl, using the parrot as an excuse.

"You're not going to work here?" the girl asked suddenly.

"No. I've got a place to look after. Have to be going back to it."

"I didn't think you were the kind that would join this bunch," she said, nodding toward the outer courtyard where the hard-looking, armed men bunked. "But you came in with those Youngers and I thought you might be a new recruit," she added bitterly.

"Recruit?" Tip inquired. "For what?"

"For war," said the girl curtly. "I mean just that—war! Uncle Dan has been hiring men to fight other men, to kill for the sake of a few dollars—but I can see that you aren't the kind who would do that. Those men out there are all men that kill for pay or just for the fun of killing."

"But you're fighting the Carwan outfit, aren't you" he asked. "And they're outlaws?"

"It depends on what you mean by 'outlaw.' All men that carry guns to kill are outside the law. The sheriff happens to be on our side, which keeps us within the law, but you can't end outlaws by becoming an outlaw yourself—carrying on a war, killing without trial. Land and cattle—they're not worth hiring men to kill other men to keep. But Uncle Dan can see only one way of dealing with men like Carwan—to try to wipe them out and to hire men like the Youngers to do it."

Tip was taken aback by that. He'd been taught to look down on hired killers and gunmen as pretty low. "You mean he's hired Breck and Morg Younger to fight for him?" he asked.

"Yes, and fifteen or twenty more. The Youngers happen to be the leaders, because they're the killers with the worst reputation of all the men here."

Tip's mouth became a thin line. "I guess you're mistaken, miss," he said bleakly. "Breck and Morg Younger don't hire out their guns. An' they're no killers. They're my brothers."

The girl's eyes snapped suddenly. "So you're a Younger?" she said contemptuously.

THE door opened behind them and Rollins, Mort and Breck stepped out. "Well, Norma," Rollins said to the girl, "our troubles are about over. You've been arguing against fighting fire with fire by hiring fighting men. Carwan is done for, dead, and with him gone, his crowd will go, too. This cowboy here ended Short Bill, as he ought to of been wiped out long ago."

"He—this cowboy—killed Short Bill?" said the girl, and she looked at Tip. She suddenly burst into tears and ran into the house.

Rollins looked after her, shaking his head. "My niece's father and brother were ended in a range war when she was a child," he explained. "She saw it happen—saw men ride up and shoot them down. You can guess what all this means to her. I wanted her to leave, but she owns half this ranch, her father and me bein' partners. She told me she'd stay and take half the risk and responsibility."

Tiy Younger stood looking at the doorway through which the girl had fled. He would have liked to explain to her that he hadn't intended to kill Short Bill Carwan, for the girl was right: killing was unjustifiable.

"She said you were hired here," said Tip to Breck and Morg. "Hired killers."

Breck seemed to understand somewhat the turmoil in Tip's mind. Now he took Tip aside.

"We've hired our guns here," he admitted. "That horse ranch we run doesn't pay expenses, and besides, Morg and me,

we like the excitement. You didn't know it, Tip, but we've had a lot of jobs like this. Rollins is payin' us good money here. It just happens in this case we're fightin' a skunk bunch, Carwan and the tinhorn gambler crowd in town, Red Pigeon it's called. Rollins and his neighbors are in the right, anyway yuh look at it and in with the law, all of us havin' deputy badges, but if they wasn't in the right, they could of hired Morg and me just the same. You leave here, Tip, and forget it. Yuh don't belong."

Breck's hand dropped on Tip's shoulder, and Tip flinched away from it. He'd been raised in a community where neighbors helped one another—a few wrangles maybe, but no one killed for years. Morg and Breck had been decent enough at their ranch, but neighbors, Tip remembered, had always stepped careful around the two. Tip would never be able to look on them the same again. He'd always hated their kind, not understanding how men could get the lust to kill.

THE cook was beating a wagon-tire for supper. Dusk had come, and above the beating of the grub call, came a loud tattoo of hoofs from the rocky trail to the ranch. The men instead of going into supper, gathered near the gate, with their guns, to wait for the rider. It was a neighbor, one of Rollins' allies, and he'd ridden his horse to a lather.

"Bad news, Rollins!" he called hoarsely. "Sheriff Dwight's been removed from office, and another sheriff appointed by the governor—one of Carwan's outfit." His lips drew back baring his teeth suddenly. "Our new sheriff is righthand-man to Short Bill Carwan—Lee Waltis."

All the men listening to the message knew what Waltis' appointment meant. It put Rollins, his hired riders and his neighbors outside the law. Every shot they fired would be outlawed from now on, and a lot of the shooting they had already done.

"Sheriff Lee Waltis," said Rollins. "They might as well of made Black Jack or Jesse James sheriff. Guess they didn't dare go so far as to have the governor name Short Bill himself—too bad they didn't for they'd of had to name another sheriff now. Dabney, Crothers and the rest of the Red Pigeon saloon and gamblin' crowd with Carwan's bunch will fight to make this county wide open—for outlaws. We was hard-pressed before with the law behind us, but this is our end. Warrants for all of us. If we resist arrest, they'll have us; if we go with 'em, they'll find excuse for shootin' us in the back. Maybe Norma was right about fighting gunmen with gunmen. My hands after all are as bloody as theirs . . . "

He turned to his riders. "You men," he said, "and the rest who are out, I can't give you the protection any more of the law. Nor I can't pay your wages any more; the bank will shut down on my credit, knowin' my herds will be looted by men wearin' law badges. I'll give you your time, and yuh better be ridin' before the new sheriff and his posse comes out."

Breck looked at Morg and Morg nodded. "Don't need to worry about figgerin' our time," said Breck. "We took yore pay while yuh had it, and we'll stick to the end. We got a few scores to settle with some of that bunch. We're speakin' for all."

"Yuh better ride tonight," Breck advised Tip. "They'll be wantin' yore scalp most of all for killin' Carwan."

"I'm runnin' from no murder charge," Tip decided. "I'll explain it to Lee Waltis. Maybe it could be fixed up to stop this trouble without more fighting. Compromise it all some way."

"That's what the Rollins girl thinks," sneered Morg, "that it could be settled

peaceful by our side layin' down. There's only one settlement for this—that's when graves are dug for one side or mebbe both."

CHAPTER THREE

Postponed Hanging

DAN ROLLINS rode away to organize his neighbors to meet the new threat and send a protest against the appointment of Lee Waltis as sheriff. At the fortress-like ranch, guard was maintained all night under Morg Younger. They expected that the Carwan outlaws and Red Pigeon tinhorns, drunk with their law-badge authority, would send out an army of gunmen under the sheriff to avenge the death of Short Bill Carwan who had inspired a blind adoration in his wild, reckless bunch, chief among whom had been the firebrand, Lee Waltis.

Tip Younger didn't argue, but he knew that they had Lee Waltis down wrong when they said he would use his office to avenge a friend. Tip had been too close to Lee to believe that. Lee had simply got mixed up on the wrong side in this war, but there was no real bad in him.

In mid-afternoon of the next day a watcher at the gate summoned the men from a poker game before the bunkhouse. Lee Waltis was riding toward the ranch—coming alone.

A striking figure this Waltis made as he rode up to the fortress of his enemies. Mounted on a fancy white horse, everything in his equipment and clothes was the best and gaudiest money could buy. His face, sharp with a hawk-nose between green eyes, had filled out a little and now he wore two guns, slung low; otherwise Tip saw no change. Some of the gunmen at the Rollins ranch said that Waltis was nothing but a bluff—others held that he was a tiger. However that might be, he was a figure to arouse cowboy envy, with his ivory-handled guns, a vest of slunk calf-hide over his red shirt, with a gold star that glittered in the sun.

Straight up to the wall he rode, jaunty, reckless, realizing that his star might be no protection. "Open up yore fort, Rollins," he shouted. "I want to talk and I don't want to yell my head off doin' it."

Morg directed that the gate be opened, and Waltis rode in, enjoying the sensation he made. He nodded at Breck and Morg, but when he saw Tip Younger he saluted and leaped lightly from his horse to cross over and hold out his hand.

"Hi," he said and his grin was that of the old Lee Waltis that Tip had known in round-up camp in all the years they had ridden together. Tip's hand went out to meet Lee's. "Things is sure in a bloody jam," said Waltis gravely. "How come yuh to mix in this, Tip? But I got to hand it to yuh—endin' Short Bill."

"Who says Tip ended him?" growled Breck.

"Three witnesses," said Lee. "And I guess Tip would admit he done it. Why not? It was pretty—just ridin' in and *ping!* An' we all thought Short Bill was a gunman. Anyway, that's that. There's a warrant for yore arrest, Tip. Now listen," he went on as a growl came from Breck and Morg Younger, "I know what yuh think of me. Yuh figger I was Short Bill's man an' still belong to his crowd. You're wrong. There's a new deck of cards on the table, and as sheriff I'll see they're dealt, uncrimped, unmarked and from the top. This is my big chance: this job as sheriff. I want to hold it, an' I know I got to show I'm on the level to do that. No friends; no enemies. And I've come to take in Tip Younger, the best friend I ever had."

Morg and Breck glowered at Waltis, hands near their guns. He was as near

death as anyone could be, and realizing it, Lee's face paled a little.

"Yuh take him in!" burst out Breck. "Go take a long spit at yoreself. The wolves that ran with Carwan would end him up as soon as he rode into Red Pigeon."

"Not if he's under my wing," said Waltis. Carwan is the first case I got to handle. It's a plain case of self-defense, but I want a legal hearin'. I want to settle this country down; show Carwan's friends that everyone who steps over the line is goin' to have a trial for what he done; show them and you I meant it when I raised my right hand and swore to uphold the law.

"Me," he went on, "I could of raised a big posse to come out here and take Tip away. But I told 'em Tip was a old pal of mine, and that he'd come with me peaceful."

There was something winning about Lee Waltis as he talked now. Even the men bitterest against him were a little impressed.

"Damn you!" shouted Breck. "I'd sooner see him crawl into a grizzly's den. He'd have more chance."

LEE WALTIS turned on Breck to make some return threat when Norma Rollins stepped in among the men. She had been listening to the talk. Her head was held high and her eyes were blazing.

"Threat for threat!" she said. "Kill this sheriff and you'll get another sheriff, and another one. Why don't you take a chance; take him at his word? He says he's trying to stop this bloody war. You've got enough nerve to fight, but not to surrender. When do you expect to start obeying the law? He's made a proposition to bring law to the county; why not trust him?"

"Trust him?" laughed Breck Younger. "Trust a shoot-'em-in-the-back killer?"

"And what are you all but that?" she demanded. "What other kind of men hire out to kill men?"

"Hold on," said Tip. "Nobody has asked me directly if I'd go. I shot Carwan; didn't intend to kill him. The bullet will show that it went through his hand first, while he was drawin' his gun. I'm willin' to stand trial." He turned to the girl. "If I did go in with Waltis, you'd likely think that I wasn't hired to kill that man. I'll go if it will help settle all this trouble."

Norma Rollins hesitated at that offer, realizing the burden of responsibility it put on her, if she influenced the rider to surrender. Maybe she had gone too far. Maybe Tip would be killed if he went into Red Pigeon.

"If you went," she said hesitantly, "I —I would think that you were trying to do the right thing. I don't know if you should go; if it would be safe. You say this sheriff has been your friend?"

"Best I ever had," said Tip. "I'd rely on his word."

"I want you all to witness," Waltis declared grandiloquently, "that I'm guaranteein' protection to Tip Younger, and that nothin' will happen to him except bein' booked for a hearing. If a hair of his head is touched, I'll ride back here—as I rode in now, alone—and you can do whatever you like with me."

Norma Rollins looked at the two uncertainly. She was suddenly doubtful about this whole matter, fearing that her horror of bloodshed might endanger the life of a cowboy who was different from the hired gunmen she had hitherto known.

"You promise that he'll be returned safe?" she demanded for Waltis, and with a bow, Waltis said, "On my word of honor."

"Then I'll go with you, Lee!" Tip said, and at once prepared to ride, on one of the Rollins' horses instead of Yank, but

before he left Breck took him into the bunkhouse.

"Look here, kid," said Breck, "I know it's no use tryin' to talk yuh outa this, with that red-headed girl hornin' in. They'll take yore gun, an' you never carry a knife but here's where you're carryin' one, hid down the back of yore neck in a scabbard. It may come in handy."

Tip agreed reluctantly, it showed a lack of confidence in his friend, Lee Waltis, and with the knife down his back hidden under his jumper he went out to his horse. There Morg had his final say.

"*Adios,* you damn fool," he sneered. "We'll put up a nice tombstone for yuh, and have somebody carve on it a coupla doves, one bein' you, t'other Lee Waltis."

But that didn't stop him. Nothin could take from him the strong unwavering faith he had in Waltis. And so the pair rode away together from the walled Rollins' ranch-house, down canyon where the cliffs shot up straight and high.

THEY were swinging around a huge, outjutting wedge of fallen cliff when eight men appeared suddenly, covering Tip Younger with their guns. Lee had fallen back to light a cigarette and their guns were on Tip Younger alone. Caught unawares, Tip made a move for his gun, but the men grabbed his arms and one hit him with a gun barrel, drawing blood. They tied his hands behind his back, and there he was, trussed up, helpless while Lee Waltis calmly sat his saddle.

"Yuh sure that no one is follerin', to rescue yore friend, Lee?" asked one of the eight.

"No one comin'," replied Waltis, letting smoke ooze from his nostrils. "An' don't call him no friend of mine. He killed Short Bill Carwan, damn him." He laughed. "I put it over on Breck and Morg. I'd like to see their faces when they find their brother danglin' down here from a tree."

Hot words came to Younger's lips, but he held them back. He had put his trust in a friend and that friend had betrayed him. Morg and Breck had been right, and now they were going to hang him. Tip in the first moment felt no anger, merely the numbing shock of finding out what Lee Waltis really was. His feelings could not turn all at once. There had been one Lee Waltis, a true friend; here in his place was a stranger that he had never known. Something in Tip Younger died, faith in other men which had been at the bottom of his belief that the world was a pretty good world, inhabited by good people.

Lee Waltis reading the look in Tip's eyes, had even his snaky little soul stirred by his old partner's contempt. "Waked out o' yore dream, did yuh?" he jeered. "This is war and everything is fair in war. You and me are enemies. You killed my best friend. If I'd been there, by God, yuh wouldn't of ended Bill. C'mon, le's git it over with. There's a big dance in Red Pigeon tonight, an' I aim to lead off the grand march with that pretty readhead from Sam Dabney's place."

One of the men began to fashion a noose and slipped it over Tip's head. The other end was thrown over a cottonwood limb. Tip knew it was hopeless, but at least he might goad Lee Waltis into accepting a challenge, allow him to go down fighting.

"You'd of saved Carwan?" he said to Lee. "The whole eight of you couldn't of saved him from me. Put a gun in my hand now, and I'll take on the lot of you. I'll even take yuh on barehanded."

But Lee Waltis had no pride. He had a man down and it wasn't in his code to let him up again.

Up canyon from the direction of the Rollins' ranch, faintly at first, but thun-

dering rapidly nearer, they heard the beat of a running horse, racing fast over the rocky floor of a dry creek bed.

Lee Waltis snapped his cigarette into the trail. "Cover that rider," he told two of his men. "If it's one of the Younger brothers, bring him down; I'm takin' no chances with them in a fight."

The hoof-beats became a loud drumming between the canyon walls as the pair crawled up over a rock to inspect the back trail, only to come sliding down again. The next instant there swept around the bend the niece of Dan Rollins, riding a big, long-legged roan, sitting the saddle as lightly as handful of thistle.

Flushed with the whipping of the wind against her face, slim in breeches and silk shirt, the girl appeared unbelievably pretty. She must have seen the noose in the end of the rope that one of the men held, but she gave no sign.

"What is this, Sheriff Waltis?" she demanded. "Where did all these men come from? I've come to ride with you to Red Pigeon, Sheriff, under your protection. I didn't dare to go before, but I know I'll be safe with you."

"We got a hangin' on, sister," said the man with the rope.

"What you mean hangin'?" demanded Waltis harshly. "Hell, yuh didn't think I was serious about that. I was just testin' out Younger's nerve." He chuckled brazenly. "Ain't I sheriff? I promised him protection, and if there's any hangin's in this county, they'll be done legal."

He winked at the other men, but he meant it—this hanging was to be delayed. The men were puzzled, but Waltis had a reputation of being a wildcat with his guns.

The girl hardly looked at Tip Younger, but in one quick glance he thought he read the real reason for her coming—to save him, from a danger that she held herself partly responsible for.

Nothing, not even Norma Rollins and what she did for him, could be quite as big as the betrayal of Lee Waltis. Little by little in Tip Younger a flame of hatred was beginning to burn. Not twenty-four hours before he had stared shocked at Bill Carwan lying at his feet, dead. Now in him there was rising a desire to see someone else lying kicking, twisting, at his feet. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Night in Red Pigeon

ON A SWINGING lope, Lee Waltis and Norma Rollins leading, the little cavalcade made its entrance into the town of Red Pigeon. Once Red Pigeon had been a small Mexican adobe-house settlement. When the mine boom had come, a new section of town had been built up, with false-fronted frame buildings. On the closing of the mines, this new town had been deserted, and Red Pigeon had gone back to the old Mexican houses. In this "Old Town" the gambling establishments, saloons and dance halls flourished, welcoming such outlaw and rustler gangs as Short Bill Carwan's, and leaguing with them to fight the decent rancher element of the county.

Word had gone ahead that the killer of Short Bill Carwan was being brought in, and Red Pigeon turned out in a wild celebration. The town was filled with members of Carwan's gang and Carwan sympathizers, all of the gambler-saloon crowd that wanted the town kept wide open. Now when this killer was brought in by their new sheriff, men rushed *en masse* to the street, yelling greetings at the galloping riders.

Whooping savagely, they ran to see the prisoner being taken from his horse in front of the old adobe one-story courthouse. Already strong talk was being made for a roping bee.

Waltis made no pretense of fulfilling his promise of an immediate hearing.

Judging by the temper of Red Pigeon, Tip Younger would be in jail only a few hours before he was taken out and lynched. A rheumy-eyed but alert old jailer took Younger down the corridor of cells from the sheriff's office, and caged him up.

There the shouts of the crowd penetrated faintly, but the door to the sheriff's office being open, Tip could hear the voices in it. Norma Rollins was speaking.

"But you said that he'd be held only for a hearing, and that he wouldn't have to stay in jail," the girl was protesting to Waltis. "Uncle Dan's friend here in town, would be glad to sign any bail papers necessary."

"Don't worry about that," said Lee Waltis. "He'll be safe here; better keep him locked up. You'll be staying with the Marchants tonight, I guess," he went on, speaking of the cattle buyer who lived in Red Pigeon and who was an old friend of the Rollinses. "There's going to be a dance tonight, in celebration of me bein' put in as sheriff. How about my callin' to take yuh?"

The girl hesitated, realizing that only through keeping favor with Waltis could she hope to save Tip Younger's life. She realized now that there would be no hope that law would be brought to Red Pigeon by the present crowd in power. All the worst element was backing Lee Waltis, and she had heard the threats of a hanging after dark.

"We'll talk about the dance later," she stated. "I'm tired now. Why don't you call at the Marchants before the dance? Are you sure it would be safe for me to go there?"

"Safe?" repeated Lee Waltis with an expansive smile. "With me, Miss Rollins, you'd be safe anywhere. Didn't I say I was going to bring law and order to this country?"

"And how about Tip Younger?"

Waltis chuckled. "He'll be safe, too, as long as he stays with me," he assured her. "Didn't I guarantee his safety personally?"

As Norma Rollins hurried down the one street of Red Pigeon, she overhead dozens of remarks that told her Lee Waltis was only lying. Lynch was in the air. It would be a wild night in Red Pigeon, and she realized her own danger in staying there. Threats had been made before by Carwan's crowd to kidnap Norma Rollins, to hold her for a money ransom and as a lever against Dan Rollins. But it was Tip Younger's danger she was thinking about as she knocked on the door of the Marchants' house, a stone cottage clinging to the slope of the canyon. A Mexican housekeeper opened the door. The Marchants had left that morning, she informed the girl, to go to the capital. Norma guessed that Marchant who was a personal friend of the governor, had gone to protest to him about Waltis' appointment, and had taken his wife with him, afraid to leave her in the town.

Norma shivered suddenly. She knew now that all her talk about peace had been foolish; her uncle had been right: the only way to fight these men was with their own poison—guns. Rummaging about the house she found a Winchester and an old six-shooter to keep it company. She loaded both guns and placed them where they would be handy.

IN HIS dark cell Tip Younger rubbed the blood back into wrists about which the rope had been tied too tightly. The door at the end of the short corridor leading to the sheriff's office was still open. Lee Waltis was in there with three of the leaders of the Red Pigeon crowd, Crothers, Dabney and another gambler. Their voices came back to Tip Younger.

A great night it promised to be for young Lee Waltis. A bottle was on the

battered desk and he was drinking with the three men who ran Red Pigeon. He had been appointed sheriff and his first act had been to capture lone-handed the killer of Short Bill. The crooks who had looked to Carwan to be their spearhead against the law and order men who wanted a clean-up, would now rely on Waltis. He would be expected to keep the town open, make it safe for bandits, outlaws and free spenders of their kind, as well as a clearing place for stolen cattle and horses. A man-before-breakfast town where the devil himself would feel like tying his top mount.

Yes, tonight was Lee Waltis's night to howl. There'd be a big dance, a lot of liquor passed over the bars, and a lynching bee to cap it off.

"Here's the lay," said Lee, waxing eloquent with the good whiskey they poured for him. "I told 'em at the Rollins ranch that I was goin' to settle this war, and I am. But not the way they thought I meant. There'll be kicks at me bein' made sheriff, and we got to move fast. Got to end it all right now, and then once in the saddle, it'll be easy to stick. We got to smash Rollins and his bunch. Here's how. We'll keep this Rollins filly in town, a prisoner, same as Tip Younger. An' we'll use her by sendin' out a message, pretendin' to be from the girl, askin' her uncle to ride in, to take her home and to go bail for Younger.

"An' when their crowd comes ridin' in," Lee went on, "we'll be layin' for 'em. We'll open up, from both sides o' the street in Old Town. We'll kill a-plenty, and what gets away will keep ridin'. To make it all right with the law, we'll have warrants swore out for all of 'em, and claim we called on 'em to surrender when they rode in."

"That's a tough bunch to wipe out," objected Dabney. "Rollins and his neighbors, and the Youngers with all those other riders. But I believe you can put it over."

"Put this through, Lee," said one of his listeners, "and we'll see yuh have a permanet job here, with more money than yuh ever dreamed of."

"And something on top o' that," laughed Waltis. "I want that Rollins girl. With some accident to her uncle, she'll be heir to the other half she don't own of that ranch. It'll all be mine when I marry her—and I'll marry her before I'm done with her. It's been worked before. Either she'll marry me or else—" His laugh told the other alternative.

He got up, spurs jingling across the floor, and the gamblers followed him.

BACK in his cell, Tip Younger was standing close to the bars, his hands went out to seize the bars and he shook them as if trying to wrench them out by main strength. Lee Waltis. Bringing his old pal to town, letting him be lynched, plotting to wipe out Rollins and the rest by cold-blooded murder, forcing the girl to marry him—it was as rotten and bloody a chain of crime as had ever been hatched. And he had called Lee Waltis his friend.

For the first time in his life, Tip Younger wanted to kill someone. He became a man with only one purpose: to live long enough to send a slug into Lee Waltis, to stretch him out kicking, as he had stretched out Short Bill Carwan.

In a moment that senseless fury passed, and a cold, hard anger took its place. As he straightened his shoulders he could feel the stiff scabbard containing the knife Breck had hung down his neck. From the office came the sound of liquor splashing into a glass.

Tip yelled and kicked on the bars of his cell until the jailer cursed him.

"Don't hog all that liquor," called Tip. "I need a drink. A big one. I'll give

yuh five dollars for half a glass of rotgut. Five dollars for one big drink."

"Needin' to buy yoreself some courage, hey?" returned the deputy, by name Ruff Heddon. He came down the corridor carrying a pint bottle about a third full. "Le's see yore money."

"I got nothin' but a ten dollar gold piece," said Tip. "Stick that bottle between the bars an' let me have it before I pass over the money. I can't run away, but you can."

The bars of the old-fashioned cell were wide apart, offered leeway for a man to pass his hand through, wide enough for a man's arm to slip through. The bottle came through, gripped in Heddon's left hand. Tip reaching for it, shot out his hand to grasp Heddon's wrist. The bottle smashed on the floor, and Heddon let out a surprised yell, his right hand diving for the gun in his holster. But he found himself jerked up close to the bars, his arm pulled far in. One side of his chest was pressed close to the cell, and the prisoner with a knife in his hand stuck the point against Heddon's shirt.

The prisoner himself scared Ruff Heddon as much as the knife. He knew when he faced death. There was no more mercy in Younger's eyes than there was moisture in a heated rock. Lightly the knife passed along Heddon's chest, slitting the shirt, scratching the skin. Ruff was suddenly quiet.

Heddon trembled, knowing that life hung by an eyelash. He had seen men before like this cowboy, men looking as if they wanted only the slimmest kind of excuse to kill. He had brought the cell keys with him, and without being asked, he turned one in the rusted lock. The next moment he was the prisoner, his gunbelt buckled around Tip Younger's waist.

"Now where's the Marchant house?" Younger asked. "Don't lie or I'll come back and kill you."

Heddon believed that threat, and he told where to find the house, on the slope back from the one street, with an arched stone front which would be easy to see even in the dusk.

After that, Tip used Heddon's shirt to gag and tie the man and locking him in the cell, went into the sheriff's office. There he took Heddon's sombrero, a Winchester and all the available cartridges. Wind was sweeping the street, kicking up dust clouds, making the town already dark. Tip was able to cross in one of the flurries, to slip unobserved into a passageway between two buildings and among a group of corrals and sheds. From there he headed for the Marchant house.

THERE was a dim light burning in one of the rooms of the Marchant house, and slipping past a high-walled corral, Tip knocked on the back door. Someone inspected him from behind a curtained window, and then the door opened on Norma Rollins.

"You got out!" she exclaimed. "I'm glad, Tip. They were planning to—"

"I know. And planning a lot more than that. We'll get horses and head back for your ranch. Got to hustle. They're sendin' word to your uncle to ride in—into a trap. Got to warn him. Men are watching this house, but we'll make it out. It's dark and if it comes to the worst, we can climb the canyonside afoot."

She nodded. "Whatever you say, Tip. I was wrong about all this. Waltis and the men in this town are beasts. I didn't realize how lowdown men can get."

"The same goes for me," he said soberly. "I never hated anybody in my life strong enough to want to see 'em hurt bad, but now—"

"We better be going," Tip went on. "Out the back, past the corral. Run ahead of me; I'll keep 'em back. No time for horses."

He opened the back door and stepped outside, but a shot came from near the corral, splintering the door frame. Before his rifle could reply, the girl had pulled him back to safety.

"Wait!" she exclaimed. "Something's going on below—in Old Town. Listen."

Down the street, in the old adobe-walled section of town, the hoarse yells of drunken men, the occasional bamming of a six-shooter, were being drowned out by the loud hammer of hoofs, the high-pitched yells of many cowboys, and the sudden crash of a rifle. An alarmed cry floated along the street. "It's Rollins. Him and his devils ridin' in. Git yore guns."

The shots came then, the first crash of rifles, like pelting drops before a storm. Norma's absence had been discovered at the ranch, Tip and the girl guessed. Rollins returning to the ranch had gathered all his men, had ridden in, taking the guard along the trail by surprise.

The men at the Marchant house left to join their fellows, and the way was open for Tip Younger and Norma Rollins to race along the crooked shack-lined alleys that lay back of the main street. More than merely Rollins' men had come—the rancher had summoned all his neighbors.

In the darkness, there was a welter of horses and running men, a whirlpool of riders that dismounted to rush the first of the line of saloons in Old Town—a wild night in Red Pigeon, wilder than Lee Waltis had dreamed. An inferno of men gone berserk, of townsmen scurrying like running rats through the splotches of yellow light that lay on the dusty street. A battle that started in darkness and developed in the lurid light of a burning building, between men who fell back from one establishment to another before the determined deadly rush of the ranchers.

Slowly, Lee Waltis, leader of the Carwan and Red Pigeon forces, fell back, fighting desperately against a pack of wolves that knew no stopping, forced slowly toward one big building at the end of Old Town's street, an adobe-walled, tin-roofed warehouse that dated back to the mine boom days.

And foremost among the ranchmen that shoved them back was a cowboy who had until a few hours before never cared to kill. Tip Younger was in the lead of the mad advance, fighting shoulder to shoulder with Morg and Breck, with a blood-lust equal to theirs—yelling when death touched a man here and there as his gun pointed, a tiger who had tasted blood and wanted more. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

Into the Pit of Hell

DAN ROLLINS, during a lull in the fighting, found his niece who had been left by Tip Younger in a safe place. She had not stayed there but had come to join the ranch fighters. "You will have to ride out of this," Rollins told her. "You don't want to see what is happening here. You might never forget it, as you have never forgotten that time you saw your father and brother killed. This won't be pretty; it's either the end of these outlaws or the end of us. Marchant and some others who saw the governor today got him to cancel the commission making Lee Waltis sheriff. Tonight there is no sheriff. We are all outlaws, and may the best outlaw win."

But the girl refused to ride away. There was need for her, for wounded men from that savage fighting began to come back to Sam Dabney's big barroom. Sheltered there from shots, they were bandaged by

Norma Rollins and returned to the fight. Later the one doctor the small town boasted brought his kit, but for a time there was only Norma Rollins to patch up the broken men and staunch the flow of blood.

A brutal, ruthless fight-to-the-finish! The ranchers were badly outnumbered, would not have lasted at all but for the three who led them—the Youngers—three fiends from hell.

Once when they paused, before a fresh advance, Breck Younger looked at Tip. Morg was not with them any more, had been carried back badly hurt. Breck, shocked at the terrible mask of his brother's face, grasped his arm.

"What's got into yuh, kid?" he asked, but with a savage growl, Tip flung off his brother's hand and rushed inside another building. Breck followed to find half a dozen men fleeing through the doorway opposite. Two went down as if cut by a giant sickle, and Breck, dashing forward, caught Tip barely in time to prevent him from running into the street and certain death. But he realized why Tip wanted to follow: one of those fleeing men was Lee Waltis. Breck knew then why Tip was fighting with all the savagery of the past ages. He knew that there is no hatred like that of a man for a friend who has played him false.

The last forays drove the Waltis forces from the establishments along the street into the huge tin-roofed warehouse which ran back many feet to the foot of a straight-walled cliff. In this the gamblers, Carwan's wild crowd, saloonmen, were making a last stand, an effective one, it seemed. For there was no rushing the place. No way of attacking from the side or rear. In front was a big double door with a well-lighted street before it, a plain death trap for the ranchers if they attempted a rush.

With one faction barricaded in this fort and the other across the street, the battle became a stalemate. The shooting dwindled to a steady but harmless interchange of shots. For all the tremendous damage that had been done to Waltis and his men, they still had a sizable force intact, as Morg Younger had declared, until most of those on one side or the other had been put away in their graves.

The ranchers gathered in Crothers's gaudy "Palace" gambling place, held a powwow but saw no solution until Tip Younger broached a plan. A small ravine ran from the street parallel to the length of the warehouse, and about fifteen feet from it. It passed close to the rear of the building where a loading platform was piled high with rubbish—barrels and boxes. Tip figured that if the rubbish were fired the roof of the main building would catch, and the whole structure be gutted by fire in spite of its fireproof walls. And it was Tip's plan to crawl up that ravine and set fire to the pile.

Breck, who had been taking desperate chances all his life, tried to talk him out of it, but there was no arguing with Tip. He brought in three compressed slabs from a bale of hay, wrapped a tarp around them, tied a lariat around the bundle and prepared to go.

Breck went posthaste for Norma Rollins, hoping that the girl might make some headway with his brother. She came, hardly recognizing Tip Younger in the bloody fighter.

"Why not wait?" she pleaded. "They may decide to surrender."

"There's one of 'em I don't want to surrender," returned Tip. "One man of the bunch that won't have a chance. Either I kill him or he kills me." And she knew that Tip had become like his oldest brother, Morg; there was the same insane light that she had seen in Morg's eyes when he had been brought back wounded. Blood lust, plain and naked, flamed in Tip Younger's eyes. That

friendly good-natured cub had turned tiger —and like his brothers, had the gunman fever in his blood.

CROSSING the street to the ravine, draining it, was a wooden culvert large enough for a man to crawl through. And through it went Tip Younger, dragging his tarpaulin stuffed with hay after him. When he came to the ravine and crawled along it and the men in the warehouse saw the strange bundle traveling slowly up the ditch. Bullets hailed into the ravine from the small windows on the side of the building, and Younger pressed his body close to the bank, inching forward. He hugged the ground closer, and crawled on.

At the place nearest the loading platform, he stopped and drawing his bundle close to him, took out the flakes of baled hay, and shaking them apart, flung them in a little pile against the stack of rubbish.

Now he touched a match to the pile of hay against the platform. Little flames began running up the boards and spread to the boxes and barrels on the nearby platform. And then shed and rubbish burst into flame. Only then did Tip crawl back down into the shallow ravine and culvert to rejoin the ranchers.

By the time Tip got back, the far end of the roof had caught, rafters, joists, ridgepole and boards were flaming under the tin sheeting and the metal buckled and curled in the heat. Spreading rapidly, it would soon eat away the support of the roof and the whole blazing mass would collapse into the building. From the crackling red tongues poured a fountain of sparks, illuminating the street to daylight brilliancy. Inside the structure, the guns swelled to a sudden desperate chorus, and then died away, leaving only the steadily increasing roar of the fire.

Men's faces appeared in the big doorway, their owners estimating their chances for a dash to safety. There was no chance, they realized, and a spokesman began to ask on what terms they would be allowed to surrender. The reply came back that the only terms were to give up themselves, and to submit to whatever fate the ranchers might decide. Finally one man was driven by the heat to accept, and two others followed him across the street. Then a steady stream of men emerged, all the varied crew that had hoped to make Red Pigeon a gunman town.

As the line marching across the street dwindled, Tip Younger stepped out, gun in his hand. "There's going to be one exception to this surrender," he shouted. "That's Lee Waltis; he can come out with his gun—and usin' it."

No answer came. The heat in the warehouse was terrific now, but still the ex-sheriff did not show himself.

"C'mon, Lee!" yelled Younger. "What's holdin' yuh? Step out." Still there was no reply; either Waltis was afraid or unable to appear.

Others of the ranch people, Norma Rollins among them, joined Tip Younger as he stood in the street, watching the door of the blazing building, blocked out alternately in flame and smoke.

Norma Rollins caught Tip's arm, swung him around to face her. "Look here," she said sternly, "there's no need to kill him now. They're all giving up. He'll get whatever punishment is coming to him."

"That's not enough," Tip returned. "He's one man that can't give himself up. I'm going to end him."

"You're just like the others, Tip!" she cried. "Forget him. If you kill him when he comes out, even if he does go for his gun, it will be murder."

"Which is what I intend it for—murder," he gritted out, and the girl gave up.

One last face appeared in the doorway, and head swathed in his jacket to protect himself from the heat, a man hobbled out. Toward him Tip Younger turned, leveling the barrel of his gun, but was not Lee Waltis.

As the man crossed the street slowly, Tip ran over. "What's become of Waltis?" he demanded.

"Layin' in there some place," gasped the man who was badly wounded. "Probably wingin' his way to hell by now. He was hit in the thigh, bone smashed, so he could hardly crawl. Seems I heard someone yellin' back in there just before I got out. Reckon the fire was singein' him."

Coming faintly through the loud roar of the flames, they could hear a faint yell —the agonized voice of a man. The giant whips of the fire popped again, and then a call came louder than before, the stricken cry of a man in mortal agony.

As Tip Younger stood in the street, slowly the red mist faded from his eyes, and the burning desire to kill passed from his heart. He was seeing Lee Waltis again, sitting across the camp fire, riding beside him on a hundred trails.

The high tension of the last few hours snapped. Tip Younger suddenly no longer wanted to kill Waltis. For what a man may be, a thief or killer or traitor, in judging him must be weighed a hundred factors that might have made him what he is—too many things for one man to pass death judgment on another. Lee Waltis, snaky, treacherous, was lying menaced by a horrible death, and he had once been a friend. . . .

A WATERING trough stood in the street, fed by a pipe from a spring up the canyon. Now Tip Younger dipped the upper part of his body and his head in it, and then drawing up his soaked neckerchief over his face, he headed straight for the warehouse doorway.

Men shouted at him to come back, but he did not heed them. Smoke was a thick billowing cloud in the doorway, and as he plunged through, the back section of blazing roof fell crashing.

Beyond the double door, it was like stepping into a pit of hell. He staggered and then went to the floor; no man could stand up under that terrific heat.

"Lee!" he shouted mufflediy through the roar of the flames—and there came an answer from the thick smoke not many feet away. On hands and knees Tip crawled toward the voice, until he bumped against the body of a man.

Above him, so intense was the heat, the roof seemed already falling. Every cell in Younger's body cried for him to turn and run from this intolerable torture. Instead his arm gathered Lee Waltis, and then, taking one gasp of the hellishly hot air, he turned and staggered toward the door. He made it in a staggering, half-mad rush, then fell into arms that plucked his burden from him, and catching up Tip Younger plunged him into the watering trough.

Blackness came to him, and minutes afterwards light again. He was lying in the dimly-lighted interior of the saloon that had been converted into a hospital. Someone was talking to him, someone who wept, someone whose arms cradled him, as if he were a child.

That puzzled Tip Younger. Why should Norma Rollins be crying?

"You went after Lee Waltis," she was telling him. "After all he did—you went in after him. And I thought you had turned killer and would never be anything else. I loved you, Tip, and I thought I had lost you—when you turned killer."

Tip Younger smiled up at her. And meanwhile, for some reason, she continued to weep violently. Tip was too young to know that women are as likely to shed tears for sheer happiness as they are for deep sorrow. . . .

THE END

GALLOWS STAKES

"You sent my brother to the gallows," said Joe Griffin, "and the minute that trap is sprung in El Centro, you, too, are going to die!"

By MILES OVERHOLT

(Author of "Outlaw Guardians," etc.)

THE game in the Slickear Saloon had been running since early the evening before. Dr. Blake called for a new pack of cards, at the same time getting up to thrust his face out a window for a breath of fresh air. Then, return-

ing to the table, Dr. Blake unbuttoned his coat and resumed his seat. It was Lafe Parkhurst's deal.

"Seems yuh done corraled yore share of chips, Griff," said the dealer, as he riffled the new deck. "Yuh been gatherin' rabbits' feet?"

But Bill Griffin didn't answer. He was too busy planning his next play. Griffin, the big, blond, mining man, had been consistently winning all night.

Others in the game were Harvey Thorley, cowman; Jeff Speaker, cowman; and Tobe Wynn, owner of the Flying W spread. Lafe Parkhurst was a cattle buyer. Dr. Blake was El Centro's only physician, and a good one. Too good, everyone said, for a little cowtown.

Griffin opened the pot with a bet of ten dollars. Wynn and Speaker called. Thorley swore softly, and discarded his hand. Parkhurst failed to see the bet. Dr. Blake hesitated a moment, then called.

Wynn took three cards, Speaker two. Griffin drew one. Dr. Blake studied his hand, frowned, then took three cards. He tossed his discard to one side of the scattered cards. Thorley stacked them neatly, holding onto the discards.

Griffin bet twenty dollars and was promptly called by Tobe Wynn. Speaker called. Dr. Blake dropped out.

"Yuh're called, Griff," said Speaker. "Let's see what yuh was bluffin' with."

"Nary a bluff," said Griffin. "Four big bullets. Was hopin' you'd raise."

"Hell!" Wynn tossed away his cards.

"An' I thought two little pairs was good," pined Speaker.

Griffin reached for the pot.

"Where did you get that ace of clubs?" asked Dr. Blake, softly.

"Where did I get it? You know as well as I do—Lafe dealt it to me, of course. Why? Take your hands off those chips!"

"Not yet. You keep your own hands off them—until we decide who they belong to! Harve, turn the pack over. I discarded an ace of clubs and I'm curious to know how it could be in two places at once!"

Thorley turned over the cards, spread them, and the men leaned closer. Then out from the discards there slipped another accusing ace of clubs.

Dr. Blake smiled. "And so we unmask a slicker, eh?" he said, harshly.

"You meaning to say I rang in an extra ace?" Bill Griffin's voice was cold and deadly.

"Well, what do *you* think!" sneered the doctor. "You are the only one who benefited by that ace. Plain logic. However, there are others here who lost money—have been losing money to you all night. Let them pass judgment. Personally, though, I'm passing my vote now—and I think you are a low-down crook!"

Griffin didn't hesitate. His hand swooped down to his gun-butt, came up. Dr. Blake smiled coldly. His hand flicked to his shoulder gun. His shot came with the blur of his hand and Griffin tumbled out of his chair, his ponderous body jarring the building when he fell. The gun in his hand was not discharged.

Instantly, Dr. Blake was transformed from a poker player and *bon-vivant* to a physician. Leaping up, he went over to the billiard table, picked up his medicine case and ordered the body laid on the table. Then he went to work.

"Bullet just grazed the lung," he announced shortly. "I'll have to probe for it. Some of you carry him over to my office."

DR. BLAKE had two hospital rooms at the rear of his office, and the wounded mining man was carried there. The physician went to work and the unconscious man became now only another patient.

The other poker players lingered about for a few minutes, then went back to the Slickear to straighten out the tangle of the vacated game and to quench their sudden thirst.

Griffin was severely wounded; Dr. Blake knew that. It would be touch and go, but that was all right. This was a job for him to handle alone.

After the bullet had been recovered and the patient had sunk into the coma as prepared by the physician, Dr. Blake sat down at the side of the bed and gazed into Big Bill Griffin's sullen face.

Then slowly, gratingly, he poured into the subconscious mind of the patient the thing which he wanted him to know and be tortured by later.

"It has been a long, long trail, Griffin," he said, droningly. "It has been seven years tonight, remember? Seven years ago that you, a big, handsome swashbuckling Lochinvar, came into my life, and took from it all my sunshine—my wife, Norine. You, with your breezy manner, your money, your big, booming voice —a he-man—swept her off her feet when she met you at Sam Campbell's home.

"I had so little to offer her, so little with which to hold her—a poor, struggling physician. And you had so much. So she went with you, helped by your brother, Joe. You with your mines, your private cars, your spending ways.

"Well, maybe that would have been all right, too, if you had made her happy. But you abused her, Griffin; damn you—you beat her, you scorned her—afterward. Then she died because of your brutal treatment. And just for that, Griffin, I shot you!

"That was why I spent four years learning to draw and use a shoulder gun. That was why I, a damned skillful surgeon, as was attested by the best doctors in the country, leave a brilliant future to come West and bury myself in this little two-bit town. For this day, Griffin—this day and some others to follow. For this is only the beginning of your suffering, Griffin. I am curing you by slow degrees, but I am keeping you here—to make your life a hell, Griffin.

"You poor fool—I put that extra ace of clubs there. This is the anniversary of your theft, Griffin—the theft of my wife and of her love. And it was fitting that the pay-off should start tonight."

IT WAS Dr. Blake's theory that during slumber or when a person is in a state of coma, his subconscious will grasp and store away any knowledge that is given it by word of mouth. And because of this belief, the physician was implanting into Bill Griffin's subconscious mind all the facts necessary for his plan of torture. He wanted the mining man to know why he was being persecuted.

Tight-lipped, the doctor continued: "With a change of name, a beard, heavy glasses and seven years added to my age, it is no wonder you never recognized me, Griffin. I would have shot you sooner, Griffin, but it has taken me all this time to locate you. But now I have you; you are mine to do with as I will—and that will be plenty, believe me. I shall make of you a wreck, mentally, morally, physically, and keep you under my will and control. My life will be dedicated to making you suffer every day you have on earth—for what you did to Norine."

Perhaps Dr. Blake was a bit insane. Indeed, he believed that he was—insane on one subject—that of his revenge.

He left his patient after a while and went down to the restaurant and ate his breakfast. He dropped into the Slickear and told the waiting cowmen that Griffin would probably recover. Then he had a brief talk with the sheriff, who had absolved him from all blame in the shooting.

"The boys tell me Griffin done stole a

ace, then when yuh called him, he went for his gun. Yuh beat him to it, then began doctorin' him. Seems like yuh deserve credit all th' way through," the old sheriff said.

When Dr. Blake returned to the side of his patient he discovered that he was delirious, muttering words, suffering. The doctor smiled. He bent over the sick man.

"Bury him up back of the cabin, Joe—alongside of that other pilgrim we had to salivate," the man was saying in his delirium. "Then you go into the county seat and record his claim. I've got to go to Santee. We'll start work on our new property Monday."

Then, oddly, a new subject came up.

"No, I never loved you. Hell, you're the worst of all the women I've had—and I've had plenty! But you are not going to quit me cold—not yet. I'll tell you when you can go, if ever. I may not let you go at all. I'm not sure just how much you know and I'm taking no chances."

And then back to the mines the wounded man's mind floundered.

"Old Pettigrew won't sell, Joe, but there's a way to handle him—and I guess you know how. Get him tonight through the window. I'll have the papers fixed up before his carcass is cold."

Dr. Blake smiled grimly. This was working out much differently than he had anticipated. He had taken down every word the wounded man had uttered.

Never once had he suspected that Griffin might be a murderer, yet—why not? He had the cold eyes of a ruthless, remorseless slayer if anyone got in his way. Now, Dr. Blake pondered, would this man suffer more in the death house than if he took him in hand? He believed he would—provided the evidence of his delirious phrases could be produced.

Twice more during the following day and night did the big mining promoter talk, and always Dr. Blake was on hand to take down the damaging phrases.

ON THE third day Griffin began to show improvement. And then Dr. Blake sent for his nurse.

"We must save him at all costs," Dr. Blake explained. "I think he will be all right, but we must be sure."

The little nurse nodded, went to work.

Dr. Blake went over and had a long visit with the sheriff.

"Well," said Sheriff Balcom when the doctor had finished his yarn, "it looks like we got enough t' go on, all right. Joe, he ain't been around hyar for a coupla years. Got scared, I reckon. Old Man Pettigrew was well known; had a good prospect up on Wildcat Crick an' then was s'posed to of walked out after sellin' it to Griffin. Dode Largey, another prospector, up an' disappeared likewise. Six-seven sudden disappearances thataway, but nobody didn't think anything.

"I'll shore start checkin' up tomorrer. Griffin's Blonde Gal No. 1 and th' Grace-and-Alice properties are bein' worked up on Wildcat Crick right now. But Joe ain't there. Mebbe I better take a pasear up there t'night an' do me some burglary. Might find somethin' in Griffin's cabin."

Sheriff Balcom returned to El Centro two days later. He asked the doctor to come over to his office. And there behind their cigars, the sheriff unfolded a tale. "We done found th' graves of four men. Kinda late, but one o' 'em was ol' Pete Pettigrew. Had a busted hand an' only three teeth. So it wasn't no trouble t' identify him. Bullet in his back.

"But I got some papers—coupla letters—an' some assay sheets an' stuff belongin' t' Dode Largey, an' Ed Wixon an' Google Gaynes. They all owned claims up on Wildcat an' all disappeared. We got plenty t' send Bill Griffin t' th' hangman."

Griffin was able to get up and go to the court house within two weeks. There he was confronted by overwhelming evidence, and the jury took less than twenty minutes to find him guilty of murder in

the first degree. And the mining promoter was sentenced to hang at seven o'clock on the morning of September fourth.

Snarling, the big man turned on Dr. Blake, cursed him bitterly in open court when sentence was pronounced. "You violated your ethics when you used the information of a delirious man!" he shouted. "If I ever get out of this I'll get you. But if I don't, my brother will. I'm sending him word to spend the rest of his life, if necessary, to get you. And he'll do it. Who are you, anyway?"

"A name for you to think about in the death cell is Brownlee," said Dr. Blake, softly, though no one else heard.

But Dr. Blake was not content. Somehow he had not gleaned the satisfaction out of sending Big Bill Griffin to the hangman that he had anticipated. He wondered why.

He had no fear of Griffin's threats—that Joe Griffin would seek revenge. That was only the raving of a frightened man, a bully who had finally lost. And so he stayed on in El Centro, a vague, dissatisfied feeling haunting him.

THE weeks went by. Dr. Blake had been kept busy. First an epidemic of infantile paralysis, then typhoid and these, together with his regular practice, took everything else out of his mind. Dr. Blake was a hard worker and he never spared himself. He would ride fifty miles to visit the poorest nester's family, with no hope of ever collecting a cent.

So when one night at midnight he received a call to come to a nester's little ranch thirty miles out in the Barren Hills to see a dying woman, he did not hesitate.

It was a long tiresome ride, and Dr. Blake never had been so far out in the Barren Hills, but the excited man at the other end of the ranch telephone line had given him explicit directions, and, aided by the bright moonlight, the physician finally located the nester's cabin at about four o'clock in the morning.

He knocked at the door. There was a shuffling of heavy feet inside the house, the door opened, and a huge hand grasped the doctor by the collar, jerked him inside.

"Sit down!" came the harsh voice of the big man who had hauled him inside. The physician sank into a chair, wondering. He saw before him a leering, bestial face, contorted into writhings of hate. He saw a six-shooter in the man's hands. He saw a killer glint in the man's eyes.

Joe Griffin!

The man took the pistol from the doctor's shoulder-holster, looked at it a moment, cursed.

"So that's the gun you shot Bill with, hey?" Then he slapped the physician's face, nearly knocking him from the chair. But the big man kept his gun trained on him, and kept his finger on the trigger, so the doctor sat back and waited.

"So you came, did you?" Joe was snarling, frothing, hatefully leering at Dr. Blake. "Well, you stepped right into the middle of disaster, Doctor *Brownlee!* Yes, I know who you are—now. Bill dies this morning at seven o'clock—so do you!"

The physician wet his dry lips and tried to form a query, but his vocal chords would not function. It was all so unexpected, so deadly.

The man was talking: "Yes, Bill is due to swing. I tried everything, saw the governor, talked to members of the parole board, offered bribes, did everything—but no use. Bill is going to die—at seven o'clock. But so are you!

"I'm shooting you to pieces at the very second when they swing Bill, savvy? And I'm going to sit here and watch you suffer till then. You'll have three hours to think of what you did to poor old Bill. Think it over and start saying your prayers."

But the doctor had now found his voice

and had gotten back some of his nerve. "Then there is, of course, no sick woman here—as you said over the telephone?"

"Of course not, you damn' fool," grated Joe Griffin, as if to speak to the physician without a curse hurt him. "That was just my way of getting you out here. This is a deserted shack. I called you from Wildcat Creek, then rode down here. I knew you would come. You never fail to make a call, they tell me—one of those ethical doctors. Ethical—hell! What of your vaunted ethics when you used my brother's delirious words to send him to his death? Well, I'm taking care of you."

"It doesn't matter a great deal now," said the doctor. "I finished what I set out to do—get Bill Griffin for what he did to me and the woman who was my wife. For killing her. .. ."

"Huh? Killing Norine? Now, I know you're crazy. Bill didn't kill her. Didn't you know? She went back East to the home of her parents two years ago. Of course, he didn't kill her!"

The physician was looking at the man wide-eyed, unbelieving. "Then she—Norine—isn't—dead?" he managed to gasp.

"No. She left here in perfect health, as I told you, two years ago— about the time you came here, I guess." Then he smiled a cold, pitiless smile. "And that's so much the better, feller. Now you'll want to live. I'm glad now that I didn't let Bill kill her that night."

Alive—Norine alive! The doctor was dazed, numbed. It was as if Norine had stepped from her grave. Alive! And all this time he had believed—had heard—she was dead! He tried to grasp what it might mean. His Norine alive!

The big man leered with satisfaction. He was glad he had been able to give his victim that crumb of information. It would add to his torture as he waited in the gray dawn until he was to die.

The doctor shivered a bit. There was no chance whatever that any sort of help would arrive. He had told no one where he was going. His weapon had been tossed out the open window. The big man held his gun steadily pointed at his body. Even had he been so inclined, the physician knew that to beg for his life would be a waste of words.

The big man scowled at the doctor, but ceased talking. It appeared as though he felt himself contaminated somehow by conversing with the man who had sent his brother to the death house.

A thousand thoughts traveled swiftly through the doctor's mind as he sat and listened to the crickets outside, to the little sounds of the early morning. There was so much to think of, now that Norine was alive. Maybe she still loved him. . . .

The big man shifted about in his chair, let his eyes rove here and there, and seemed to grow restless as the alarm clock he had brought with him loudly ticked the minutes away. The doctor watched the clock. . . .

AN HOUR of silence went by. The physician's mind seemed to die. He tried to think, but his brain refused to function. Joe Griffin arose, took a turn or two in front of the doctor, paused.

"What I ought to do is kill you right now, but I promised Bill to wait till seven —to watch you die just as he will die. But it's nerve-wracking, this waiting."

The doctor swallowed, said nothing.

"They tell me you think you're one hell of a card shark. I found a pack of old greasy cards here in the shack. We've got nearly two hours. Suppose we play a little poker to kill the time?"

Still the doctor said nothing, staring straight ahead, forcing himself to think.

The big man grasped the doctor by the collar, jerked him to his feet.

"Come on," he snarled. "We're playing some poker. I can't stand this damn, silence!"

The physician dragged his chair to the

kitchen table. Joe Griffin sat on a wooden box opposite him, produced the frayed, dirty cards, dealt a hand.

"Here's matches for chips," he said. "Bet 'em high, feller. Whatever you win, you lose. These cards are so sticky you can hardly deal 'em, to say nothing of shuffling 'em. Play your hand!"

Mechanically the doctor picked up his hand. Mechanically he tossed in half a dozen matches.

"Call you," said Griffin. The pot went to the physician, who picked up the greasy pack of cards and began dealing.

The cards stuck together, but the doctor did not wet his thumb to deal them as did Joe Griffin. There would be a million bacilli on them, he thought, professionally. So by using both hands to separate the cards, he finally got a hand dealt.

With the big man's deal, he swore profoundly at the sticky cards, and then produced an idea. "If we had some talcum powder, we could make those damn cards slip."

The doctor made no reply. He was wondering if he could tip over the table and disconcert the giant opposite him—put up some kind of a fight. But he knew all the time it was hopeless. Griffin held his six-shooter in his right hand even when he dealt. The man was twice his size and very powerful, he knew.

But when the physician picked up the cards to deal the next hand, he suddenly remembered his medicine case. He spoke for the first time since the game started. "I have some talcum powder in my medicine case," he said.

"Well, hell! Get it," growled Griffin. "What's the use making the game any tougher by using those sticky cards?"

The doctor got up and went over to his case. The big man kept his gun trained on the physician's back. "Don't try any funny work!" he ordered.

The doctor said nothing, but returned in a moment with a bottle containing a white powder. He poured some out onto the table and rubbed the cards into it, one by one. The big man said nothing.

Griffin picked up the deck, shuffled it.

"That's better," he grunted. Then, from force of habit, he wet his thumb and began dealing.

Dr. Blake dealt the next hand, lost the pot, passed the cards to Griffin. The big man wet his thumb with his tongue, started to pick up the cards, grunted.

Then, without a word, he slumped off the dry goods box and to the floor.

The physician, unsmiling, arose, walked around the table and felt of the man's pulse. Griffin was quite dead.

Unhurriedly then, the doctor carried the cards to the old rusty stove in the corner and set fire to them. Then he found a gunny sack and thoroughly washed the table. After which he went and got his case, brought it over to the table, glanced at the clock. It was exactly seven!

Then, smiling oddly, he picked up the bottle of deadly aconitine powder from which he had poured enough "talcum" to make the cards slippery, placed it in his medicine case and unhurriedly went out to his waiting horse . . . and then, still smiling, headed toward El Centro and the end of his career in the West. . . .

He was going back home—back to his practice, and to Norine!

"Blood On the Owlhoot Trail"—Another story by Miles Overholt appears in the next issue—Published September 28th!

By ROBERT E. MAHAFFAY

DEATH RIDES

(Author of "Death on the Singing Steel," etc.)

A skeleton spread was the once-prosperous Slash M—after range war and rustlers had stripped it of its sleek herds. And because he was a bred-in-the-bone cowman, with a cattleman's courage and range-savvy, Bruce Manton swore he'd build the outfit up again—or his bones would whiten alongside those of his dead cattle!

A PUZZLED frown knit the corners of Bruce Manton's bright gray eyes as they swept over the timbered and broken slopes which lay between him and the looming Twin Shoulders—two rugged, close-nestling peaks which marked the summit of the Cedar Fence range.

Manton turned his lithe broad-shouldered body in the saddle, seeking the face of his companion with an expression which had become ominously casual.

"Looks like we did right in coming, Crag. We're cleaned out proper this time. And Lord knows what's happened to Dearborn."

THE SLASH M

Novelette of Cowman Courage

Scowling, Crag Dalby unleashed a flowing stream of oaths. Though in his sixties he was still a great barrel-chested frame of a man, with gnarled angular limbs, huge hands and feet, and rocklike weathered features. By some odd happening, his harshly phrased words boomed out of his cavernous lungs like mellow music. A voice, had Crag Dalby, which would have beguiled angels to their undoing, and at the same time he possessed the physical power to wrestle the devil into submission.

"Never did like Dearborn's looks," he growled. "To much hop-skip-and-jump about him. Too lily-livered. Too damned careful about which horses he topped. Reckon, though, it don't matter much now what he did or didn't do. You're shy them two hundred Herefords, Bruce. And he's either dead or gone with 'em."

"He wasn't any great shakes for nerve," agreed Manton reluctantly, "but I didn't have him pegged for a rustler. I don't think he'd go that far."

Three weeks before, Legs Dearborn had ambled into the Slash M, hit up Bruce Manton for a job. Inveterate chuck-liner was written indelibly upon him. Not a bad man, but not a strong one, Manton had catalogued him. The young Slash M owner had signed him on, not that he wanted to, but because there

was no help for it. It had been five years since the Slash M had been able to afford top riders.

Dearborn had been sent into the lower Twin Shoulders country to gather some two hundred cattle which had summered there. That had been three days ago. He had not returned.

Now Bruce Manton's keen gray eyes roved again over the stretch of wooded country, stripped bare, obviously, of the prime Hereford steers which had formed the remnant of the Slash M herds. Those herds had been slowly whittled down. Only the bones of the Slash M remained, picked clean of cattle by rustlers.

Bruce Manton, called into the closing moments of the battle by the death of his uncle, had waged his fight bitterly but fruitlessly. Now there remained on the once prosperous Slash M only himself and rugged, surly Crag Dalby. A half grin plucked at Manton's lips as he thought of Crag Dalby. The massive oldster might have left with the others, but he had not. Having ramrodded the Slash M for over a dozen years, he had cursed the air into a hazy blue when told that there was no longer any money to pay him, and that he could no longer be used. There had been a bloody, grueling fight then between the old foreman and the new owner. A classic—that battle for supremacy between what had gone before and what was to come. A mighty two-handed sword bludgeoning against the lightning-fast darting of a thin rapier! It was the first time that Crag Dalby had ever been whipped. And Bruce Manton was the man who had done it.

But out of their conflict had been born a hard, bluff friendship which only death could sever.

Crag Dalby stayed on the Slash M—without pay—and followed Bruce Manton like some enormous, powerful and mellow-voiced Hereford bull.

Manton touched spurs to the sleek sides of his blue roan. "Better be moving on up," he suggested. "Maybe we can find some sign telling what happened." His steady voice did not reveal his knowledge that this last blow meant ruin to the Slash M.

"Hell," growled the scowling Crag. "You talk like you was inviting a man to a strawberry sociable. 'Better be moving up,' says you. 'Better be looking around.' Blast that! Better be dabbing oil on your smoke-pole. Better be laying hands on reserve ca'tridges, I'm thinking. It's time—"

His prediction died in his throat. Under his thick gray brows, his eyes squinted questioningly at Bruce. The single explosion of a shot had struck up crisply from the broken foothills before them.

THE sound rolled gradually out of earshot. And in the chopped and timbered stretch of country before them there was no succeeding sound or sight to explain it.

Both men had reined in. "Ain't hearing things, am I?" grumbled Dalby.

Bruce Manton's gray eyes narrowed. "A six-gun," he said. "Half a mile away, I'd guess. Maybe they didn't get Dearborn after all."

A sudden blast of shots rattled out, drumming persistently like the pecking of a jack-hammer.

"Dearborn's holed up," flared Crag Dalby, "and they're trying to smoke him out."

They urged their mounts down from the knoll, plunging into the cavern-like dimness of the towering pines. They rode side by side, swiftly, almost silently on the spongy pine-needle carpet. In a short time they struck the more open section. There were grassy open basins, green slopes then shaley rises, crumbled outcroppings, rocky canyons slashing down

from the high peaks that towered above.

The shooting continued intermittently, as if stray shots were being flung at some fleeing, occasionally visible target.

The two men skirted the upper end of one deep coulee and came out abruptly on a rocky, brush-cluttered shelf which overlooked another and larger one. The crash and rolling thunder of shots mushroomed out of the cavity below them.

Sliding from his mount, Bruce Manton stepped warily to the edge and peered over, using his unsheathed gun to push back the obscuring brush.

Some three hundred feet below him four riders were milling where a slide had blocked further penetration into the canyon. Smoke was spurting from their gun muzzles, and the whine of the ricochetting lead rose in an eerie scream over the roar of exploding shells.

Crag Dalby thrust his huge shoulders next to Manton's.

"What in the devil they potting at?" he demanded.

Bruce shook his head. Judging from their shots they were aiming at someone who was seeking to escape by clambering up a perilous trail which led over the face of the canyon wall. The overhanging lip of the canyon, however, obscured that person from above. From below too, Manton guessed shrewdly, if the fruitlessness of the shooting was any indication. The climbing target might emerge some two hundred yards to the left of the two watchers.

There came a rumbling curse from Manton's side, and a six-gun exploded within inches of his head.

"By God, it's Luke Raynor!" burst out Crag Dalby. He was thumbing the hammer of his short gun in a quick and raucous spurt of firing.

The four men below scattered under the rain of lead from the canyon rim. While the sharp angle made accuracy difficult, the bullets struck close enough to send them scuttling for shelter. Dismounting, the four took refuge along the rocky floor.

The last of them to disappear from view was a rail-thin individual with a straggling black beard. For a moment he stood carelessly exposed to Crag Dalby's fire, staring overhead for the marksman. Even at the distance which separated them, Bruce Manton caught the evil and piercing quality of the man's gaze. Then one of Dalby's slugs scattered chips at his feet, and like a swift hurrying spider he sidled into the protection of a fallen boulder.

"Damn shooting straight down," complained Dalby wrathfully. "Man might as well be popping gravel at the moon. I'd give my right arm at the elbow for a decent shot at that coyote, Bruce." He drove more lead downward, and shots answered him spitefully.

"Raynor, you said?" queried Manton, grinning in spite of himself.

"That's him. Luke Raynor. He's the gent that's been raising hob with the Slash M. He's stole you blind, as I don't need to be telling you. Has a hide-out back o' the Twin Shoulders somewheres. What he's doing down here beats me. It ain't like him."

With cool efficiency Manton helped Dalby cover the unknown man's escape up the cliff side. "Ain't like him?" he asked as he paused to stuff in fresh ammunition. "Why not?"

"Don't ask me," grunted Dalby. "Just ain't, that's all. He stays hid as a rule. Ain't seen him myself for five years. There's something big in the wind, I'm thinking, or he wouldn't be down here."

Bruce Manton began to squirm to the left toward the spot where he estimated the climber would emerge.

He found it, a narrow ragged cleft in the rimrock. A recent slide, however, had

sheered away a section of the narrow footpath, leaving a hollow underneath the rim. The scratch and rattle of brushing rock sifted up to him.

Bellying as far out over the rim as he dared he called down. "Hi, pardner. You making out?"

For a long moment there was no reply. Then a voice floated coolly to him. "A rope, if you have one, friend. I can climb no farther."

"Back in a minute," returned Bruce. "There's one on my saddle." He puzzled over the sound of that voice as he darted back to his horse. It had a strange foreign ring, a precise method of shaping syllables which was unfamiliar. That the man was not Dearborn was certain.

A moment later he was swinging his loop down over the ledge. To his right Crag Dalby's gun crashed angrily, guarding his movements.

He heard a sharp cry from below, caught a quick glimpse of Luke Raynor leaping out from behind his boulder to shoot in the open. Then he felt the rope jerked taut. "Ready," he called, and commenced to pull. The burden was surprisingly light. Hand over hand he drew the stranger up.

The man came panting over the rim, lay for a time on his stomach, then slowly, haltingly pulled his shoulders and chest upright. It was then that Manton saw that the man's feet were bare and that the flesh was fire-blackened and puffed with blisters. He saw too, with a start which widened his bright gray eyes in amazement, that the stranger he had saved from Luke Raynor's guns was a Chinaman. His yellow face was twisted with pain, and his almond-shaped eyes met Manton's with a glance which was at once pleading and unafraid.

"I am humble with gratitude," he said clearly. "But for you, I would now be dead."

Face rigid with horror, Manton gestured at the Chinaman's burned feet. "In the name of God," he said. "Why did he do that?"

A grim smile played across the colorless lips of the Chinese. "For gold," he murmured. "For as much gold as two men can carry."

He slumped forward on his face, the consciousness gone out of his hurt body.

CHAPTER TWO

Four Rifle Shells

DUSK had sifted lazily down over the ranch buildings of the Slash M when Bruce Manton and Crag Dalby supported the crippled Chinaman into the front room and stretched him carefully on the couch.

After a parting volley, they had left Luke Raynor and his three men to depart from the canyon as best they might. For as Bruce pointed out to the fuming Crag, they could gain nothing at the moment by continuing the offensive. Even under the fire of the two guns above, Raynor could have made a break for liberty at any time, had he so chosen, with more than an even chance of getting clear.

And the tortured Chinaman needed immediate attention. The journey to the ranch had necessarily been slow, but no word of complaint had passed the lips of the Oriental.

When his burned feet had been treated and bandaged he sat up and accepted a stiff glass of whisky, although his unbearded and unlined face showed no hint of his need for it.

He set the glass down and smiled faintly at Bruce Manton who stood beside him. "Thanks are as futile as a dam of twigs against a swollen river," he said softly. "I shall not mention them again. I have little to offer you, and that little not yet found"—his small shoulders lift-

ed slightly—"but an equal share of it is yours."

"Forget it." Bruce Manton laughed shortly. "You've just been handed a raw deal. Later, maybe—"

"Time runs swiftly, my friend. There is treasure—much of it—lying ready to be taken. It is gold, as I told you, gold that twenty years ago was crimsoned with my father's blood."

Crag Dalby, who had been surlily muttering to himself over their loss of Luke Raynor, glanced up from under his shaggy brows.

"Gold?" he boomed in his mellow tones.

The Oriental, whom Manton now saw to be a very young man, gestured toward the front windows and the door. "It is best that they be closed," he directed. His slant eyes followed Crag's great frame as the man moved to draw the shades and bar the door. They flicked quickly over the huge stone fireplace on his left and across the room to the stairway leading to the floor above. "There are no others here?" he asked Manton.

"Only the cook. He's an old codger—a deaf mute; harmless."

The Chinaman looked quietly at Bruce Manton and Crag Dalby. "It matters little, but my name is Mar Hing. You are surprised, I detect, to find a Chinese here; also to find that I speak your English so easily. The latter answer is simpler; I was born in San Francisco, and lived there until I was twenty-two."

His quick, narrow eyes darted at Crag. "As for my being here, perhaps you remember, ancient one, when other men of my race prospected in this country for gold."

"Heard about 'em," rumbled Crag. "Never saw 'em myself."

Mar Hing nodded. "They came down from British Columbia, following the rivers. Leading one of those prospecting parties was my father. They had found, as I told you, dust and nuggets which made heavy burdens for two men. When on the point of departing from the country, they were discovered and attacked by a band of renegades. There was a chase through these mountains which lasted a week. The prospecting party was at last overtaken and killed. But not, however, before the gold was concealed and a map made of its location. The others, including my father, sacrificed their lives that one man might escape with that map. He did. That was twenty years ago. Faithful to my father's instructions, that lone survivor sought me out, and when I was old enough, presented it to me."

Bruce Manton, his gray eyes shining, leaned forward. "And you found the gold?"

MAR HING shook his head calmly. "Treasure has a thousand tongues," he said. "Each speaks its message to the passing winds. An unscrupulous countryman of mine, to whom I went for advice, preceded me here. He enlisted the services of one Raynor, an outlaw, to aid him in stealing the gold."

"Luke Raynor, by God!" roared Crag Dalby. "So that's what brought him down!"

Mar Hing's slant eyes showed no emotion. "I suspected nothing. They caught me, tortured me. I pretended to faint; they relaxed their vigilance and I escaped. They would have caught me again, however, had not you intervened. It is for that I am indebted to you."

"The map—did they get that?" asked Manton.

Mar Hing smiled faintly. "No. Because they did not know what it was they sought. My father was a very clever man. They saw the map, touched it, but did not recognize it."

Casually, as if the movement were of

no import, Mar Hing drew from his pocket a silver dollar. For a moment he toyed with it, his face inscrutable, then allowed it to slip through his fingers to the floor.

The coin rang with a dull sound.

"Counterfeit," snapped Crag.

"Yes. My father was a wise man. A thing of no value would not be stolen."

Bruce scooped up the dollar, examined it carefully, stared inquiringly at the Chinaman.

"It's counterfeit, all right. Dated 1872. Rather a bad job—crude. Looks like it had been carried for twenty years—worn pretty smooth. But if it's the map, it beats me."

"Look more carefully," suggested Mar Hing. "On the cheek of the woman's head."

Bruce pored over it. "Scratched," he offered at last. "But it's too small to make out clearly."

"A tribute to the art of my father," smiled Mar Hing. "We Chinese, as you know, have long practiced the most delicate workmanship the world has known. That was done with the point of a needle, yet to read it requires a magnifying glass, or extraordinarily sharp eyes. Give me a pencil and paper and I will reconstruct it."

For once startled out of his glowering surliness, Crag Dalby rummaged in the table drawer, producing the required articles. Mar Hing sketched rapidly for a moment, then passed the drawing to Manton.

The young Slash M owner stared in perplexity at the pencil marks that showed two wavy lines below which were a row of four objects looking like rifle shells. A crudely-drawn half circle showed beneath the bullets, and finally was something that looked like a skull.

"What does it mean?"

"Sometimes," sighed Mar Hing, "I wish my father had not been as wise as he was. These symbols, if one is clever enough to read them, mark the location of the gold. That it is somewhere in this country I know. That much I learned from the man who brought me this map, but he was then very old and could tell me no more."

Bruce Manton frowned and bit his lip. "Wait a minute. These two wavy lines look like Twin Shoulders, Crag. Now, if it's a map there must be the points of the compass. North, then, is probably at the top—at Twin Shoulders. These other symbols are strung out below or to the south of Shoulders, aren't they? The skull at the bottom of the map is easy," rapped Bruce. "If my guess ain't wrong, one of the prospecting party who was killed off during the chase was buried on top of the gold as a marker. What about that, Mar Hing?"

The Chinese nodded gravely. "It is likely. They would feel that there was no better guard for the treasure than the bones of a dead man."

BRUCE MANTON'S lean young face was flushed with eagerness and excitement. Crag Dalby, though he pretended cynicism, was equally caught up by the thrill of the search. Only Mar Hing remained impassive.

"Now," said Manton, "what in hell do the four cartridges and that half-circle mean?"

Mar Hing's yellow head suddenly jerked toward the door. Dalby caught the movement, rose out of his chair growling, his six-gun in his hand.

"The scraping of a boot," said Mar Hing. "On the porch, perhaps?"

Crag leaped for the door, flung it open. Only silence greeted him. No one was there. Crag came back grumbling.

Bruce was fingering the paper map, frowning at it.

"Direction and distance," he murmured.

"He was trying to show direction and distance. We've got the direction—south. Now what in the devil do these four cartridges mean? Maybe—" he stopped talking and banged his fist on the table. "Those rifle bullets show the distance. *four rifle shots due south from the Twin Shoulders!* By God, that must be it!"

Mar Hing laughed softly. "There is no cipher without its key. I think you have guessed it, my friend."

Bruce stared at Crag Dalby. "Four rifle shots down from the Twin Shoulders, Crag. You know the country better than I do. This half circle, now. It might mean a bend in a stream. Or maybe a crook in a canyon. Can you put your finger on any such spot?"

Crag Dalby's bushy eyebrows knotted. "First thing any man would say, knowing the country, would be the Devil's Elbow, Bruce. Canyon runs down smack from between the Shoulders. There's almost a right-angle turn in it—at about that distance. It's sort of a landmark."

"The Devil's Elbow it is," chortled Bruce Manton. "Looks like your search is getting close to the end, Mar Hing."

Crag Dalby looked up sharply. "Fire," he snapped. "Hear it?"

He swayed to his feet and ran toward the door leading into the kitchen. Bruce jumped after him, the crackle of flames ringing in his ears.

The rear of the ranch yard was eerily illuminated by a glow from the harness shed. The far end of the small structure was ablaze. Flames shot skyward, eating voraciously into long-dry timbers.

Above the hungry slavering sound of the fire came the thud of retreating hoofs. Crag Dalby's short gun bellowed and snarled after them, leaping angrily in his hand, but the pound of running horses continued, to soon die out in the night.

There was no checking the fire. A little of the harness and other equipment was saved, but very little. Finally Bruce and Crag, weary, smoke-grimed, returned to the house. Crag Dalby was leading. He entered the front room, stopped short at what he saw, and whirled on Bruce.

"Tricked, by thunder!" he cried.

Mar Hing was stretched out, arms outflung, half on the couch and half on the floor. On his forehead swelled an ugly, bleeding bruise.

The paper map was gone.

CHAPTER THREE

At the Devil's Elbow

IF THE night raiders had intended to kill Mar Hing, they had failed. Under the ministrations of Bruce Manton he soon regain consciousness.

"The man who does not trust his intuitions suffers for his stubbornness," he remarked calmly. "That scraping boot I heard came from the upper floor. We came slowly from the canyon this afternoon. One of Raynor's men must have preceded us here and been hiding above. When you went to fight the fire, set probably by Raynor himself to draw you off, he came down the stairs, seized the map and struck me with his gun."

Bruce Manton looked slowly from Mar Hing to the bleak-visaged Crag. "That means, then, that they know as much as we do about the gold. He must have heard our talk. I'm thinking it'll be a race in the morning. A race," he went on grimly, "between Raynor and us for the treasure. We'll get two-three hours sleep, then start. Hit the Elbow about daylight."

Three hours before dawn the following morning Bruce roused Crag Dalby. The silent Limpy, with uncanny alertness, was already stirring in the kitchen. "A rifle and six-gun for both of us," Bruce directed. "A pair of shovels, too, I reckon."

"Glad you mentioned the hardware first," opined Crag brusquely. "Precious lot of digging there'll be until Raynor is cleared out of the way."

Moving as if they were the only live things in his wizened face and body, the eyes of Limpy, deaf old cook, followed their preparations.

They had almost completed their quick breakfast when Mar Hing appeared in the doorway, fully dressed and clad in an old pair of Bruce's fur-lined slippers.

Manton regarded him keenly. "Better not try to make it," he advised. "You're in no shape for a job like this."

Mar Hing's yellow face was serious. "He who cannot endure hardship never sees his goal. Already blood has been spilled on the treasure. That blood was not craven, and I would not have it said that mine had changed to such."

A grim respect showed on Bruce Manton's face. His hand went out and gripped that of the Chinese.

They were saddling in the corral when Limpy came down from the house, trailing a frayed and dusty rope. About his waist was belted an old Frontier model Colt.

"Hey. Forget it," Bruce told him, although he knew the old man could not hear him. "We ain't after prairie chickens. Unpack your artillery and get back to the house."

Limpy guessed the meaning of the words and shook his head. He glanced at Bruce's booted rifle and at Crag's. Then with jerky precision he proceeded to rope out a mount.

Crag chuckled. "It's the smell o' buried gold does it. It's brought older relics than Limpy out of their graves." Bruce Manton's bronzed face, however, was serious. Ordering Limpy back, of course, would be futile. The old cook was too set in his ways to take orders.

At a word from Manton the little party cut into the darkness which lies so heavily before dawn, angling northeast in the direction of the Twin Shoulders.

They pushed on across the rolling country, out of it and into the chopped foothills. Once in the timber the tree tops cut off the faint light of the stars. The way was gloomy, quiet, dangerous. Treacherous cutbanks had to be avoided; there were stretches of slippery shale; sharp-sided coulees offered their threat to man and horse.

THE first light of day spread a dull gray brush stroke across the horizon. And as the sky shed its blackness, Bruce could see the twin pinnacles of the Shoulders looming to the north above a succession of wooded slopes and ridges.

Bruce and Crag were heading the little party. Mar Hing followed, and trailing in the rear was Limpy.

Bruce, staring over the hills which intervened between the Shoulders, caught sight suddenly of a horseman riding slowly along one of the ridges. "One of Raynor's bunch?" he said quietly to Dalby.

Crag scowled upward. "Funny. He's headed out o' line for the Devil's Elbow, and going in the wrong direction. Looks to me, too, like he's trying plenty hard to be seen."

They went on a hundred yards more, searching for the rider to reappear. Then from behind them came a sudden, chilling animal sound—the only sound which the mute Limpy was capable of making. It was followed almost immediately by the roar of Limpy's ancient revolver.

Bruce whirled in his saddle to see the bearded face of Luke Raynor bending over his horse's head as he charged in from the rear. Two shots snarled from behind Raynor; the aged cook's horse crumpled and pinned Limpy by one leg. He lay without moving.

Manton's hand flashed to his side and up again. Flame and lead lashed from

his gun muzzle. Raynor's horse pitched to its knees, throwing the outlaw over its head. He rolled twice in the trail without losing his gun, stopping within inches of the prostrate Limpy. Bruce was thumbing back his hammer, and Crag Dalby had whipped out his own weapon, maneuvering his frightened mount for a shot, when Raynor, instead of shooting, pressed the nose of his revolver against Limpy's head.

"Hold it," he snarled. "Don't move—any of you—or I'll blow this man's brains out."

Mouth tightening in a grim line, Bruce Manton held his fire. Crag swore in a rumbling angry undertone. Mar Hung, weaponless, stared at Limpy.

"That's right," snarled Raynor. "He dies if you make the wrong play. Drop your guns. Hold 'em out easy and drop 'em. Come on in and get 'em, boys."

For a moment Manton hesitated. By sacrificing Limpy's life he might kill Raynor. But something in him rebelled at the thought. It was Limpy's unnaturally sharp eyes which had detected the ambush; he had fired the first shot of warning. Reluctantly Bruce threw his gun to the ground and Crag did likewise.

Another man had come out of a ravine behind Raynor. Two more appeared in the trail from the opposite side. Then Mar Hing's voice broke out, high-pitched. "Limpy is already dead!"

Luke Raynor straightened, his teeth bared in a grin of triumph. His gun swept over Bruce and Crag. "Sure. You damned fools. That first shot killed him. I'll be needing your horse, Manton, seeing you killed mine. Climb down."

Bruce stared unbelievingly at the little cook's still body. It was true. Limpy's worthless, harmless life had already been added to the grim blood toll of the buried gold. His gaze turned darkly to Luke Raynor. "It was a needless killing—murder," he began. And Luke Raynor's cold laughter cut him off.

"Start digging, mister. I ain't much of a hand with a shovel myself. Seeing as you brought 'em, we'll let you use 'em. We'll move along to the Elbow and see what we can turn up."

The Devil's Elbow lay between sheer rocky cliffs. A level sandy floor, no more than forty feet wide, bent sharply to the left before it ended abruptly in a hundred foot drop which had once been a waterfall. Above, the canyon widened in a series of shallow ledges.

"It's bones we're looking for first, according to your map," declared Raynor. "First the bones and then the gold." He looked shrewdly at Bruce and Crag. "You'll dig where I say and the way I say. If you don't, you'll sure as hell be dead men. Ask Crag. He knows me."

Sullenly, Crag Dalby wrapped his gnarled fingers around one of the shovel handles. At Raynor's direction they began a narrow trench, two feet in depth, which would bisect the Elbow.

SHORTLY after they had started work, a horseman picked his way carefully down the ledges at the upper end. As he drew near, Bruce Manton saw that he also was a Chinaman.

Raynor laughed hoarsely. "There's the gent you were wondering about—up on that ridge, Manton. You got so anxious about him you forgot to keep an eye on your own back yard, just as I figured."

When the second Chinese had joined the group Mar Hing said quietly: "A traitor wins no reward but death, Li Yong. Do you think when the gold is found that this man will share it with you?"

The second Chinaman's lips curled back and he struck Mar Hing across the mouth with his fist.

The morning wore on. The first trench

yielded nothing. Another cut the Elbow into four sections. The two men began methodically to explore the four sections one by one.

The burning heat of midday turned the narrow rocky prison into a bake oven. Luke Raynor, the Chinaman and two of his men retreated to the shade at the upper end of the Elbow, leaving one man with drawn gun to guard Bruce and Crag as they dug. They tied Mar Hing's hands behind him and left him to broil in the middle of the sandy space.

At intervals Raynor came down to curse them. The blazing heat made the digging a racking torture.

Two of the sections were thoroughly pulverized. They passed to the third, and at last began the fourth. They worked on doggedly, relentlessly, each movement bringing a fresh stab of pain.

The last section was all but finished. "Son," muttered Crag hoarsely. "This was as rotten a steer as I've ever been given."

Bruce shook his head wearily. "No, I reckon not. There was treasure here once. The story is honest enough. But it was a long time ago. It's been dug up and carted off long before now."

"You think Raynor'll believe that?" growled Crag. "He'll keep us digging here till we drop. He'll finish us off and head back to the hills, and he'll take the Slash M cattle with him."

"I been thinking that," nodded Bruce. "Listen, Crag. I got a hunch." He whispered earnestly for a moment, then the two resumed their back-breaking work.

The guard dozed in the hot sunlight. Mar Hing squatted silent and impassive in the sand a few yards away from the digging. At the upper end of the Elbow lounged Luke Raynor, the strange Chinaman and Raynor's other two gunmen.

Suddenly, through the hot oppressive quiet, rang a shout. Crag Dalby's massive fist crashed against Manton's chest, sent him staggering back. "Mine!" he boomed in his great mellow voice. "I found it, damn you!"

The guard jerked erect, came running. Hate was visible on Bruce Manton's strained, sweat-grimed face. "I found it," he screamed. "Half of it belongs to me. Take your dirty hands away, Dalby!" He flung himself shrieking at the huge oldster, clawing, flailing. They went down in a tangled heap in the bottom of the shallow pit they had dug, concealing whatever lay in the bottom.

Raynor was on his feet, darting toward them.

"Gold!" the guard flung over his shoulder. "They've got it!" He hesitated on the brink of the hole, holding his gun ready. He planted one foot down, extended a hand to grip Bruce's shoulder, fling him off.

In that instant the weaving welter of bodies in the bottom of the pit resolved into two distinct figures. Crag Dalby hurtled against the guard's knees, knocking them from under him and toppling the man down upon Manton.

Bruce Manton rose to his feet in a half crouch, centering the guard's gun upon the advancing Raynor.

CHAPTER FOUR

Grub-Liner's Play

A BULLET from Manton's gun drove a spurt of sand against Luke Raynor's boots. The outlaw stopped, snarling, his own weapon half drawn. Behind him ranged his two men and the Chinaman, Li Yong.

"First man to come on swallows lead," Bruce warned hoarsely. "Don't draw, Raynor. By God, I'll kill you if you do!"

Teeth showed beneath Luke Raynor's flimsy black mustache. He began to circle slowly to the opposite side of the can-

yon, away from the pit. There was no surrender in him, nothing but a malignant threat. There were three of their guns to Bruce's one. They were waiting for that slim fraction of a second when Manton might relax his watchfulness.

"Get Mar Hing, Crag," Bruce croaked. He stepped out and began to stalk slowly toward the ledges at the upper end of the Elbow. The four remaining bullets in his gun were not enough for a battle with the outlaws. At best, he knew, he could hope only to keep them at bay long enough to escape.

Crag Dalby pulled Mar Hing to his feet, caught one of the Oriental's arms about his shoulder, and half supported him as they hobbled after Bruce.

Slowly they mounted the ledges, Bruce's swaying weapon spelling death to the first man who moved. There were horses above, tethered somewhere in the shade.

But distance broke the spell on the rumpled sandy floor of the Devil's Elbow. One of Raynor's men, a lean, stringy gun-fighter, snatched for the weapon on his thigh, brought it up flaming.

In reply, Bruce's gun roared like a cannon between the walls. The gunman clutched at his arm, swearing. But Raynor and the other spread out swiftly, the thunder of their shots swelling up into the fierce blue sky. Lead flailed near the three fugitives.

"Cover," snapped Manton. "We'll have to run for it."

The mighty Crag swept up Mar Hing's slight frame in his arms, dodged for cover at a lumbering run. As they cleared the canyon rim, Manton snapped two swift shots behind him, momentarily halting the pursuit.

A storm of profanity burst from Crag's lips. The mounts were grazing on the opposite side of the canyon. There was no alternative. On foot they plunged into the undergrowth. Half a mile they made, Crag staggering under the growing burden of the Chinaman, before the sound of pounding hoofs came from behind.

Bruce cast a shrewd glance before and behind them. The wooded terrain of the country had led them north toward the Twin Shoulders. He jerked his head in the direction of the pursuing horsemen. "Raynor stopped long enough to catch up his bronks. Three of us can't fool 'em, Crag. One of us—maybe. You and Mar Hing hide out here. I'll lead 'em farther north. They'll play hell catching one man in this country, if he plays it right."

Crag expostulated vehemently, but Bruce stopped him. "I can make better time. Smaller. You'll have your chance at 'em—later."

He left Crag and Mar Hing concealed in the mouth of a draw which flanked an open space. On the summit of the next ridge he waited. A long rifle shot which fell short told him that he had been seen. Then he dropped from sight and began his weary, dangerous flight.

The rays of the sun beat down mercilessly. Twice Bruce was sighted again, and twice the jumble of broken canyons and wooded slopes provided him with a refuge.

IT WAS then that high on the slope above him he saw a figure emerge from the brushy hillside, stand for a moment gazing out over the country below him, and disappear as miraculously as he had come.

Bruce Manton blinked his eyes. That man had been the long-missing rider, Legs Dearborn!

Bewildered, Bruce swung to his feet. He began the ascent to that strange ledge. He noted as he climbed that there was a faint trail, chopped by shod hoofs, but screened perfectly by the undergrowth from any but a chance observer.

He reached the ledge and found an

opening into the hillside. The passage was so narrow that it would scarcely permit the entrance of a man's body. "Dearborn!" he called. "You there?"

A voice, cracked and hollow sounding, answered him. "Manton? Is it you, Manton? Thank God! I'm needing help bad. I thought maybe it was those devils after me again."

The narrow entrance glowed as a light flared up inside. Pushing in, Bruce Manton saw a strange sight. Cast into relief by an oil lamp on a canned-goods box was the face and body of Legs Dearborn. He was crouching on the floor, fingering a Colt. One trouser leg was rolled above the knee and his calf was bandaged by a red bandanna.

"Potted you, did they?" said Manton. "How come you're here?"

Dearborn shrugged his lean shoulders. "Luck, I reckon. Raynor run off them Herefords. Near downed me doing it. I got away, stumbled on this place. Been holed up for two days. Just getting so I can move around a little."

Bruce stared at the interior of the cave which narrowed into blackness at the rear. "What's this place?"

Dearborn hesitated, fumbling for words. Even in the dim light from the lamp, his face was weak, his jaw unsure, his eyes shifty. "Why—I ain't just sure. Prospector's lay-out, I guess. Found this stuff like you see it. What you doing here, Manton? Come after them cattle?"

Bruce laughed shortly. "I wish I'd stuck to that. Got a fool notion about some gold instead." Briefly he recounted the happenings of the day and the afternoon before.

When he had finished, Dearborn looked shrewdly at him. "Map, eh? Four cartridges. What in hell made you look way down by the Devil's Elbow?"

"We figured it," said Bruce curtly. "Figured the range."

Cupidity shone in Dearborn's unsteady eyes. "You damned fool! You figured the range of a modern rifle. You said that map was drawn twenty years ago. The guns they must have had then carried only a little over half as far."

"By thunder!" Bruce jerked out. "Maybe you're right."

"Course I'm right. And you know what I'm thinking? I'll bet my hoss and saddle that there half circle was a whole circle when that Chink drew it—only half of it got rubbed away, being carried that long. I'll bet it was a whole circle, meaning a cave!"

Bruce Manton's eyes narrowed. "A cave? You ain't meaning—?"

"I sure am. There's a skeleton in the back of here. An old one. It's been sort of a joke among the fellers. We all knew about it, but didn't figure—"

"Who?" snapped Bruce.

The Colt Dearborn had been hanging onto flipped suddenly level with Manton's breast. Dearborn's hand clamped around the butt, and the hammer clicked back. "Take it easy, Manton, or I'll be putting a slug through you. Raynor and the rest of us, I'm talking about."

He got up cat-like, plucked Bruce Manton's gun from his waist-band, and leered at him. With a short laugh he untied the bandanna from his leg.

"Didn't figure I was Raynor's man, did you, Manton? Well, I ain't been long, but I reckon this job'll put me in solid enough. I just got back after driving them Herefords into the hills. Hadn't heard about this gold hunt. But being as I missed out on the fake, I'll stage a real one of my own."

"So Crag was right," said Bruce bitterly. "You've got nerve enough to double-cross, but no more."

"I don't cross them as pays me enough," growled Dearborn with an attempt at

bravado. "Come along, Bucko. We're looking under them bones."

Dearborn picked up the lamp with one hand and gestured Bruce toward the rear with his gun.

Half buried under a pile of loose rock where the cave sloped down to its end, was a grinning white skull. There, under a scant foot of the crumbled stone, they found fifty sausage-like buckskin sacks, still stout after twenty years in the dry air of the cave's interior.

Bruce carried them back to the center of the cave. As the last sack was deposited on the top of the little heap, the rasp of voices and the thud of hoofs sounded from outside.

Dearborn grinned. "Raynor, I reckon, coming back. When he comes down from his Shoulder hide-out, Manton, he uses this place. I didn't find it by any accident."

CHAPTER FIVE

Blood-Stained Gold

FEET stamped to the entrance. Raynor's voice snapped—wary, wrathful: "Hello. The lamp's lit. Inside there! Who is it?"

"It's me — Dearborn. Everything's jake. Got something to show yuh."

Luke Raynor eased in through the entrance behind his gun. He caught sight of Manton and flung himself back against the wall of the cave, ready to shoot.

Dearborn laughed gleefully. "Don't get skeered, Raynor. I've done pulled his stinger."

"Smart, ain't you?" snarled Raynor.

"I sure am. Plenty. Smart enough to find that gold you was hunting for. Take a look, Raynor, at what's clogging up the middle of your cave."

Li Yong and two of Raynor's gunmen crowded behind him as he stooped over the treasure. Where, Bruce wondered, was the other gunman? There had been three of them.

Raynor hefted one of the sacks appreciatively, slit a tiny hole in one end and allowed the yellow grains to trickle into the palm of his hand.

"I found it," said Dearborn shrilly, warned suddenly by the look of cruelty which darted into the outlaw leader's face. "If it hadn't been for me, you'd never have got it. I get a share of it. Don't forget that!"

"Think so, do you?" growled Raynor. "Did you get those cattle into the hills?"

"Sure. Just got back this morning. I was waiting for you here." His voice whined. "I get part of the gold, don't I? If it hadn't been for me—"

Raynor ignored him. He turned to his men. "Lug this stuff out to the horses. Pack it for traveling. I reckon there must be between seventy-five and a hundred thousand dollars in this haul. That's plenty. Better shove along with 'em, Chink."

He faced Bruce Manton. "You're lucky, kid, that this coyote here found the gold instead of you. Lie down on your stomach and put your hands behind you."

Gray eyes steely, Bruce hesitated.

"Lie down, damn you," snarled Raynor. "You don't know when you're well off."

With strips of rawhide he took from the canned-goods box, Raynor bound Manton's hands and feet. As he tied the last knots, one of the gunmen called from the entrance that the gold was packed.

Raynor stood upright, staring at Dearborn. "Got the gold from in back, eh? Under that skeleton?"

"Yeh. I figured that was where—"

"So did I—when the Elbow flopped. Take a last look, Dearborn. No sense in leaving any of it."

The hapless Dearborn's jaw dropped

open. He passed a shaking hand over his forehead. "We looked, Raynor, honest. There ain't any left. Let's get going."

"Look again," growled Raynor.

Dearborn backed toward the rear of the cave, his limbs trembling as if the bones had lost their brittleness. "Aw, Raynor. You ain't going to— Oh, God, don't, Raynor! I don't want any of it! Let me out, that's all!"

His head struck the sloping pitch of the cave. He crouched there, trapped, and in a fury of desperation his hand flung to his gun.

The weapon did not even clear its holster. Luke Raynor's six-shooter blurred into view, exploded with a furious discharge which crashed deafeningly in the little space. Legs Dearborn, weakling, pseudo-renegade, slumped awkwardly down on his face.

Raynor strode out into the open without a backward glance. Moments later, retreating hoofs pounded past the cave.

BRUCE MANTON tested the rawhide. It was secure, no doubt of that. He lay quietly, staring at the natural rock ceiling of the cave. The lamp was still burning. He wondered what had become of Crag and Mar Hing.

A groan startled him. It came from the rear of the cavern and was accompanied by a shuffling noise, as if a body were being dragged along the floor.

"Dearborn?" said Bruce sharply. "Didn't kill you, eh?"

"Yeh, he did," came the grim reply, weakly. "But it's a couple minutes off. I got—what was coming to me, Manton. Should have stuck with—grub-lining. Hell of a way to go out, ain't it?"

Bruce could see him, painfully dragging his bleeding body toward him. The man's face was haggard, stained with perspiration. He groped in a pocket for a knife, groaning with the effort, found it and awkwardly clashed at Manton's bonds.

Free, Bruce stretched the dying man out and felt for the wound.

"Nothing you can do," protested Dearborn weakly. "I'm set to make the big circle. 'Fore I go, though, I'll tell you enough—to get—Raynor. Thought I'd take a flyer at rustlin'," he gasped. "Didn't work out. Raynor'll go to his Shoulder hide-out—'fore he clears out of the country. He's got money cached there. Take the trail up—straight between the Shoulders, Manton. Going down the—other side, turn right. . . ." For a moment it seemed as if the last bit of energy had drained from Dearborn; then he roused himself slowly. "Turn right, at the—the Wind Rocks. Looks like—there ain't no trail—but there is. . . ."

"Easy," said Manton, gently.

Dearborn coughed convulsively; his eyes were wild and staring. "You'll find your cattle there. Get Raynor, Manton. Kill him!"

His lean fingers clamped on Bruce's arm. Carefully Bruce worked free.

Legs Dearborn was dead.

There was one practical move, and Bruce made it. He unbuckled Dearborn's belt and holster and belted them about his own waist. The weight of the loaded gun and the tug of the cartridge belt gave him a comforting feeling.

He walked to the mouth of the cave and peered cautiously out. He dodged back. There were horses passing at the foot of the slope. Hand on the butt of his gun, Bruce looked again.

A chuckle of surprise and relief rumbled in his throat. He stepped out onto the ledge, and shouted down.

Crag Dalby, his huge frame astraddle his own horse again, reined in. Behind him was riding Mar Hing, quiet and imperturbable as ever. And trailing the Chinese was a third animal, riderless.

In a moment Bruce had joined them. "How in the devil?" he demanded, waving his hand at the mounts.

Crag Dalby's gnarled countenance, usually surly, split in a wide grin.

"Easy, Bruce. 'Member that guard whose gun you got? Well, like a plumb idjut, he trailed behind the others, bringing along the spare cayuses. Raynor and the rest went boiling past us there in the draw, hot on your trail. Me, I counted 'em to make sure. One missing. 'We'll squat,' says I, 'and see.' Sure enough, this guard gent comes loping along pretty soon, real sassy-like considering his lead-spitter had been took away from him. A flung rock got the cayuses mixed up a little, and I jumped him 'fore he could get his rifle free. Ended up by my drilling him, 'cause he didn't know no better'n to argue. So now, sonny, we're ahead three horses and plenty of artillery. What's the program?"

Quickly Manton outlined the events which had taken place since he had left Crag and Mar Hing. Dalby whistled in amazement. "So there was gold there after all! Sorry I said what I did back there, Chink. And Raynor's got it?"

"He's got it," snapped Bruce, "and we're going after it! First thing I want to do is swing back and pick up that dead guard's clothes. They may come in handy. Then we're heading for Raynor's hide-out!"

THE beams of the sun were shooting over the hills in long, almost horizontal shafts when the three men stopped at the Wind Rocks, three rugged pillars which leaned at the top as if forced over by the pressure of the wind.

"What if he didn't stop?" asked Crag.

Bruce shrugged. "We'll be out of luck. But I think he has, from what Dearborn said. There's money cached there."

"Yeh. Money he got peddling Slash M beef."

It was true that no one would have suspected a trail leading from the main one past the Wind Rocks. Hard rock, that country, masses of it, shelves of it, cliffs of it, piled layer upon layer.

The three men clambered blindly into it, over broken stone which left no sign of their passing. Up and through it they worked until they came out again upon timbered slopes, dotted only occasionally with rock patches.

There was a dim trail now, blurred by weather but still bearing evidence of its use by both horses and cattle.

They skirted a towering bluff, followed the crooked course of a winding ridge, and dipped over the summit of a wooded rise.

"Steady," growled Bruce. "We've caught up to 'em."

He slid from his horse and motioned the others back out of sight. Some three hundred yards down the slope, in a tiny grassed basin, lay a cabin. A thin streamer of smoke eddied from its stone chimney. In the soft dirt on past the shack, ran a wide hoof-chopped swath. There would be cattle beyond the next ridge, in all probability. Manton's bright gray eyes snapped as they traveled to the corral behind the cabin. Four horses stood tied to the bars. Two of them were packed, and other two already saddled.

Bruce unrolled the guard's clothes which he had tied behind his saddle. Not much distinctive about them—a blue bandanna for a neckerchief, dirty gray shirt, faded Levi's and worn leather chaps.

Bruce donned them. "How'd the gent ride?" he asked.

"Floppy, sort of," grunted Crag, "like he was about to fall to pieces. Lazy duck, I'd say. Hell, Bruce, it's handing you the big end. Better let me take a chance on doing it."

Bruce grinned at the huge oldster. "Wouldn't mind, to be honest about it. But you'd look more like a Twin Shoulders ahorse-back than you would their friend. You and Mar Hing better slide down through the brush. When the fireworks start, take it on the jump for the front door. I'll be at the back."

Mar Hing looked steadily at Manton. In the depths of his almond eyes lurked a tiny flame.

"I know nothing of guns," he said calmly. "I fear I would be useless. If it is permitted I will go my own way."

"Suit yourself. I reckon you're right. Got a plan of any kind?"

Mar Hing's yellow face held no expression. "A river takes what course it may. I have a debt to settle."

Bruce Manton swung into the saddle. "Here's luck, Crag." Crag Dalby nodded grimly.

Then Bruce was riding down the trail in the gathering dusk, slumped lazily in the saddle, his body jerking loosely. Behind him ambled the two spare horses.

Before he had traveled a quarter the distance to the cabin a man stepped out of the front door, rifle in hand. He stared at Bruce for a scant moment. For that brief space of time Manton's breath came in quick, short bursts. Then the man had turned back into the shack.

He headed for the corral, reached it and dismounted. Without hurry he unsaddled the three animals and turned them inside. As he flipped the saddles up on the bars he heard the back door softly open and close. He caught the flash of a figure disappearing around the far corner of the cabin as he jerked a glance over his shoulder, but that was all. Funny, he told himself. He wondered which of the men inside it had been.

He walked slowly toward the house, keeping his Stetson well down over his eyes. He was reaching out his hand for the knob of the door when a voice roared out inside.

"Where's that damned Chink?"

The thought flashed through Bruce's mind that Li Yong had foreseen that his end would be similar to Dearborn's, and had taken to flight.

Raynor was shouting. "If the yellow son lays a finger on that gold—"

The door jerked open, and Bruce was face to face with Luke Raynor.

FOR an instant, the bearded outlaw's vindictive face showed stark surprise. Then his hand streaked to his holster and he fired once by swiveling up the muzzle, leaping backward at the same time. The hasty lead missed.

Bruce's shot blazed into the wooden panels. On the heels of the shot he darted through the door after Raynor to find himself in the makeshift storeroom which formed the rear half of the cabin. The outlaw was backing through the doorway into the living quarters, gun blazing.

Bruce felt lead rip into his side. His own weapon crashed and Raynor staggered. Acrid powder smoke seared into Bruce's lungs. Through the surging veil of it he saw the two other outlaws. The lean, stringy gun-fighter with the injured arm, relic of the Devil's Elbow fight, had sprung from the cot where he had been lying and was trying to shoot with his left hand. The third man, ugly and baldheaded, had dropped a frying pan full of potatoes to the floor and was snatching a gun from the holster on the wall.

Bruce fired again at Luke Raynor. It would be a second more before the baldheaded man could get into action. With the echoes of his shot came a booming bellow from outside, and at once there was a shivering crash. The front door bulged inward, split into two pieces in a shower of splinters, and Crag Dalby sprawled full length upon the floor. Still

bellowing, he rolled to his knees, thumbing the hammer of his Colt.

His first shot went wild; his second caught the bald-headed gunman between the eyes, drove him backward in a tangled heap on one of the bunks. A bullet from the stringy gun-fighter's weapon drew a grunt from Dalby.

Luke Raynor, unable to turn away from Manton, was slowly sinking to the floor. A baleful glare shone like fire in his eyes. He strove mightily to trigger his weapon, but could not. Bruce Manton stared at him and did not fire again.

Then, like the quick dying of a sulphur flame, it was over. Luke Raynor and the bald-headed outlaw lay dead on the red-streaked floor of the dingy Twin Shoulder hide-out, and the stringy gun-fighter held his one good hand upraised.

"Done," said Bruce Manton, stonily.

Crag Dalby's eyes roved over the shambles of the room, as if he were an angry bull seeking some new object to charge. He shook himself and strode to Manton.

"Bruce," he growled, "I'm thinking we've been crossed. Where's that renegade Chink of Raynor's? Last I saw of him he was running those pack horses out toward the Wind Rocks. That was just after the first shooting, and I couldn't do nothing but keep on jumping for the house."

"Mar Hing—" began Manton.

Crag scowled. "Mar Hing hung back like an unbroke colt. You reckon he and this other Chink throwed in together?"

Manton's eyes roved over the scene of carnage in the room and then back to the rugged oldster. Without replying, he strode through the shattered door and out into the cool evening air. Down the hill slope from the Wind Rocks trail, like some ghost-like figure of doom in the darkness, was riding Mar Hing. The two pack horses trailed behind him.

Somehow, there seemed nothing that Bruce could say to the stolid, silent Chinaman. He tried gruffly. "Waited for him, eh, Mar Hing?"

"It is wise, when a river overflows," replied the Oriental, "to dam in advance the course of the new stream."

THE three men slept outside that night, under the peaceful sable blanket of the sky. Sometime before dawn, unobserved he thought, the stringy gun-fighter slunk to the corral, saddled a horse and escaped.

In the morning they buried Luke Raynor and the bald-headed man. They buried also Li Yong, the traitor, whom Bruce Manton found with a quill piercing his jugular vein and a spreading brown stain on the earth beside him.

As Bruce had surmised, they discovered the two hundred Slash M Herefords in the valley beyond the next ridge, and they found that in addition to the gold in the two sacks there was some twenty thousand dollars in bank notes. The Slash M was on its way to a recouping of its lost fortunes.

Two weeks later Bruce Manton and Crag Dalby rode with Mar Hing and his share of the gold to the railroad town of Hisken.

As Mar Hing was boarding the train, Bruce Manton thrust out his hand. "Luck to you," he said gruffly. "I'd never ask to see a whiter Chinaman."

Crag Dalby fumbled for words, coughed, blew his nose, and finally took refuge in scowling to cover his feelings.

Mar Hing's yellow face broke into the first honest grin it had perhaps ever known. His almond eyes darted at his two friends. "It is written," he said solemnly, "that oil and water can never mix. Sometimes I wonder about those old proverbs."

THE END

In The Saddle

THEY had left St. Joe weeks before in that creaking, ramshackle canvas-topped wagon; the gaunt, gentle-eyed man, his sun-tanned wife and their little girl. Headed West; into the cattle country, into the boundless regions as yet unfenced, sold cheap as public domain to anyone who could bet Uncle Sam that he could, by dint of sweating work, luck and land-savvy, eke out a living within a stated period of time. Squatters. Dry farmers. Scissor-bills. Fingers of Empire, groping into the golden promise of a new world and a new beginning, or toward tragedy and heart-break in a lonely, desolate land. . . .

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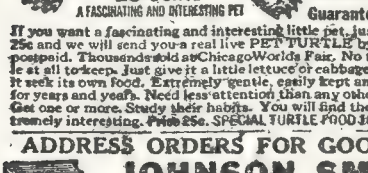

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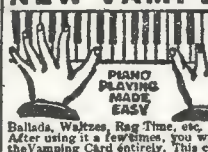
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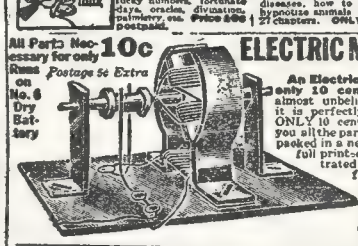

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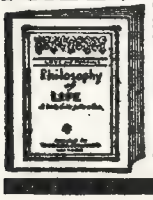

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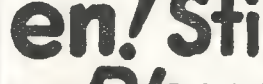

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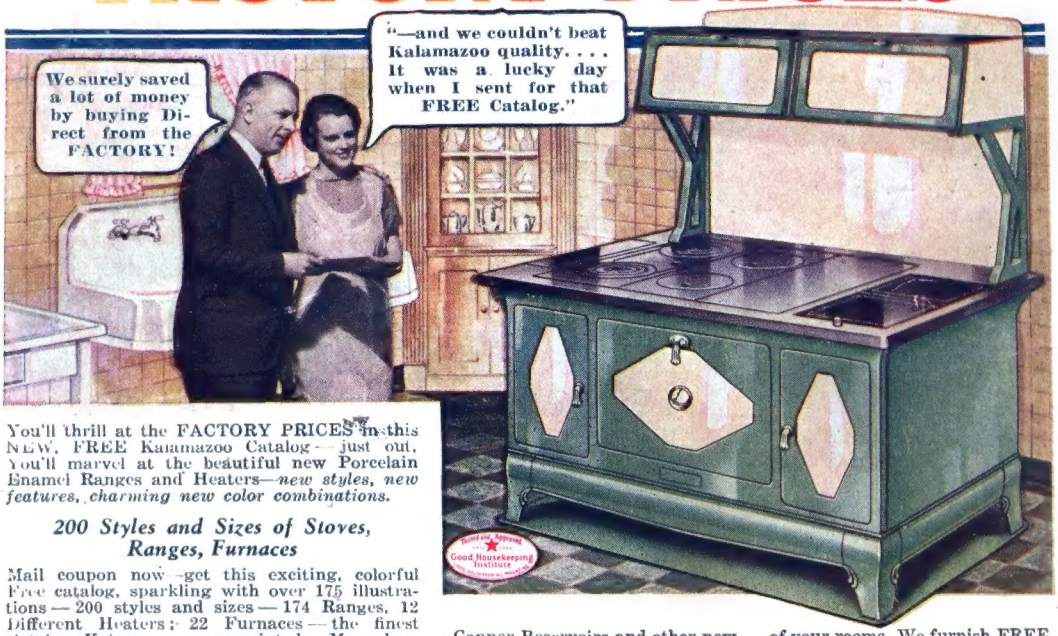
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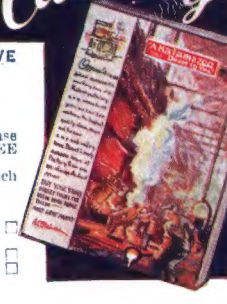

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